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Vivian

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Vivian

A THESIS

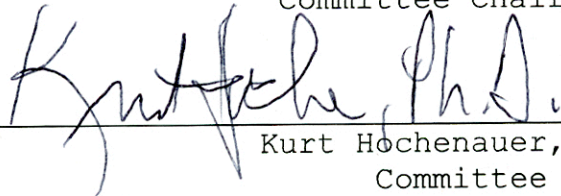
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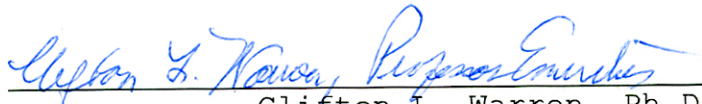
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I would like to offer a word of thanks to the people who helped make this novel possible. My children have been patient, though often made to fend for themselves during this process. They never lost faith, even when spurring me on toward the finish line. My parents have not only been a constant source of comfort and support, but have also been the inspiration for the many period details of this story.

I began writing Vivian before being blessed with three grandchildren (triplets). The triplets in the story were born in a tent near a mining town. They died shortly after their birth and were buried in the fork of a lonely Wyoming road: brief lives not forgotten.

I have long felt a need to record some of the old stories my parents tell involving their families (in-laws and outlaws, saints and scoundrels). Many events in the novel will be recognizable by my family members, even though the old stories are made new with a generous amount of spit and polish. They've been trimmed, embellished and scrambled (assigned to various characters), and the names have been changed. This was done affectionately; to protect the guilty . . . you know who you are.

Mostly I am thankful for my teacher, Dr. Clifton Warren, who knows the power of encouragement.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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"Any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, no matter how passionate." (W. H. Auden). Walt and Vivian are unhappily married, living in a tent-camp during the early part of the Great Depression. Walt's physical strength ensures employment wherever they travel. The story opens with the burial of the couple's newborn triplets. Vivian says they fell. Walt wants to believe her.

Vivian eventually pawns her husband's heirlooms to buy a train ticket. Walt follows, needing to take care of her because of his wedding vows - yet Vivian is not an easy woman to love and cherish. She is also exceedingly difficult to protect, as Vivian leaves several dead bodies in her wake.

Walt battles more with his own moral values than he does with Vivian. At times, his inaction seems to be a strength and, at other times, a weakness. After numerous altercations and uncomfortably close encounters with the law, Walt realizes their tumultuous marriage must end - one way or another. Above all, this must be done without breaking his vows.

Vivian manifests a multitude of mental woes which cause her anti-social behavior. The plot is that of journey - both masculine and feminine. It is full of irony, religious symbolism, anecdotal motivation and vigilante tendencies. Ultimately, Walt and Vivian need each other.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

for dad

Vivian

Part I

"Live so that when your children
think of fairness and integrity,
they think of you."

H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Chapter 1 - The Fork

Nothing kicks quite like Betrayal. It's personal. And there's a purity in its power to destroy. Strangers don't have proper access to do it right. It's to be done tenderly, like a lover's whisper. When Betrayal casts its eye, there is first a numbing cold that washes over the skin while the gut trembles and the soul sinks to its knees. Time slows. Hold that moment close. Work up a good steam. Lay propriety aside. Then, unleash an unreasonable response - simple and sensible in its own way. Regret it later, and resolve to never trust again. Trust is as useless as Love. Or, perhaps, there's a chance it was all a misunderstanding. Yes, hope should linger. Walt reflected on these sentiments as he prepared to bury his children.

A fork in the road being built that day was barely visible as snow whipped about Walt and his friend, Jule. Shrieking wind stung the noses and ears of the men while icicles formed on their mustaches. Walt shuddered - not so much against the cold, but against previous wrongs he'd mistaken as the worst thing his wife could do. Those were now dismissed as insignificant throw-aways in light of the

current folly. Vivian seemed to treat Walt's heart as a training ground of sorts, in which she employed a full battery of tests. How much weight can a man bear and still stand? Her peculiarities typically never called for a response, since she knew her deeds were hurtful. What more need be said? But this time she had gone too far. Three dead children. A monstrous deed. Walt needed to respond in kind. And Vivian should expect no less. Or, perhaps, yes, Walt could walk the easy road and simply believe her story.

On their way to the fork, Walt's mind necessarily wandered to a happier time when the sun shone on men who had reliable work - a time before he came to know his wife needed more tending than most. On one of those sunny days, Walt walked in youthful happy air and decided on a whim to learn to paint. He put his mark on a piece of paper, paid the little bearded man, and shoved the receipt in his trouser pocket. It seemed a bit silly now, how excited he'd gotten. Vivian certainly thought it was ridiculous. Called it a cockamamie notion. She scoffed as she looked the paper over and tossed it into the fire. Her insults no longer had the same effect as when the couple were first married - when Walt's wounds were fresh. He dismissed her

cruelty now as simply her way. And how she loved to pick at those scabs, and sometimes reopened them full sore - like this night, as he carried his silent and still babes to their grave.

Walt never actually took those paint lessons, and that joyous moment stayed as dead as his children. Recalling pleasant memories is painful. No matter now. Everyone's fortunes had changed since then. The mighty had fallen and those less fortunate were left to claw at the dirt. They grew nothing but dust. The institutions and even the earth betrayed men - so why not expect the same from a woman?

But the light. Shadows swayed across Jule's boots as he kicked at the snow and left dark tracks behind. Walt would have painted such a scene without pain - without the bitter sting. That was the great comfort of paint. Camp tents could be warm on his canvas, with whole families enjoying each other's company. A painter could make silent songs or stories come from hued throats that a viewer could hear. And he could gift smiles or tears where none had been before. The old instructor told him as much.

Walt had watched that little bearded man caress the arms of a woman with his brush. He polished her fingernails with rose. Her cheeks blushed brightly as a

ripened peach while he applied color to her parted lips. He caused her head to tilt backward slightly as he willed a gentle breeze in her hair. And that, he stroked into gold. Sunshine warmed her face as he unbuttoned her soft blouse - making room for the pearls decorating her shadowed throat.

Walt wanted to paint Vivian - give her a satisfied smile and feet firmly rooted at home. He could nail her shoes to the floor in a painting and give her an admiring smile. He'd be able to make her do whatever he wanted with swirls and spatters of kind colors and shapes. A pleasing counterfeit of his wife, created to help him stand against her harshness. He could make her rock in her chair, gently tending to the children - and he'd give her a sweet song.

But a real woman of breath and blood was not as flexible as oil on canvas. No, Vivian would not be dabbed and stroked into a work of art - but as Walt's people often said: she definitely was a piece of work.

Those sunny days had long been worried away. Nothing left to do but grow old hoping - and to look for better work. Walt's size and strength ensured him manual labor. He'd done all sorts of work, but enjoyed being an ice man the best. People were always happy to see him on his route. Here, however, he and the rest of the crew spent

their days building a road. The fork splitting one road into two was where Walt planned to lay his children to rest. He stood motionless, holding three bundles wrapped in sections of bed sheet, and watched Jule work by lantern light. Eerie shadows played across their faces, reflecting against the shovel. When the snow wasn't coming sideways to stab him and Jule, it swirled softly about like a tease. More stabbing would certainly follow.

Breathing deeply, Jule shivered out a needed question that he hesitated to ask, "What you gonna do with her, Walt?"

Walt could count on Jule's discretion without asking - even with these circumstances. Kicking slowly at the snow, Walt lowered his heavy head. "Just dig."

Jule let the shovel's handle cradle in his arm as he shifted on his feet with a few quick stomps and huffed warm air onto his fingertips. The work at the fork would not wait, though the wind jeered and sometimes sighed for the effort. Wind slapped them hard in the face as a reminder of man's smallness - of frailty - then peeled away with a howling laughter. Jule's shovel added lonely piercing notes striking gravel. Water from Walt's eyes froze on his cheeks.

This winter blow created a convenient blind for the digging, offering cover from curious eyes in the camp. Building a road was honorable work when a man could get it, but this labor hidden by night had a bad taste, a slow gnawing in the gut. Jule's body shivered in concert with the shovel that shivered in his hands. Teeth chattering, he tilted a bit toward Walt and restlessly pushed his point. "She done it on purpose."

Walt's eyes flashed in Jule's direction with anger, but through pursed lips said nothing. He couldn't bear having someone else, even a close friend, speak ill of his wife - even if he agreed. Walt felt like stealing away Jule's shovel and swing it to clip him across the jaw. Or at least he could flip some gravel his direction. Instead, Walt simply shook the coldness from his wide shoulders - and shook his friend's statement, too. Although the accusation needed aired, Jule read Walt right. Silence is an answer. Walt drew the load he carried still closer to his heart - lifeless bundles - and the matter was settled. Jule would not mention it again.

Watching the digging, Walt noticed each snow flake fall onto exposed clay that would soon be frozen through. The sight was too much, and he closed his eyes to shut out

the long story screaming about Vivian and her hardness. He wondered what he might have done to prevent having this funeral - or being on this prairie period. If he'd stayed in that old mining town maybe she wouldn't have turned so sour. Men died daily in the darkness there, yet Vivian liked the little rented room with rosy wallpaper. Perhaps they should have stayed. The thought of a suffocating cave-in seemed preferable to this. Walt mumbled to himself, "What's done is done."

Jule dug a hole deep enough and stopped. Huffing onto his hands again, he asked hesitatingly, "Should we say somethin'?"

Walt knelt down and put the first bundle in the hole. Soft, tiny people with futures cut short. Walt let his fingers linger across their shrouds, trembling, but not so much from the cold. Gently, he placed the other two, slower each time. He tucked them into a small bitter bed marked only by the fork in the road. There would be no proper marker for the grave - to avoid sticky questions. They were no bigger than the neighbor woman's loaves of bread and looked smaller still as they snuggled together.

To Jule, it seemed as if Walt was trying to listen for one more cry - even a whimper - so that he could pull them

out. The men watched snow fall into the hole, providing a clean white blanket from heaven, yet so cold. Frayed edges of torn sheet flitted back and forth. Such movement made it difficult to remember it was only the wind. When he had quartered that sheet, Walt thought he should strangle Vivian with the fourth piece and finally be rid of all promises made, but he quickly chased that wickedness from his skull to attend to the funeral. He would keep his promises - his vows to God to protect her. If he'd have been home he could have stopped her, but now, all that remained to be done is keep her from the hangman. Yes, he would keep his promises. What is a man who doesn't?

Jule asked again, "Shouldn't we say somethin'?"

Sliding his old cap down slowly over his face, Walt effectively wiped his eyes at the same time. His sandy brown hair looked wet and dark from hard work and lack of washing. Clumps lunged out in every direction and whipped back and forth with the wind. He looked to his friend as water again formed and froze across the bottom of his eyes. "I don't know the words."

Jule shook his head slow and then nodded. "God sees 'em."

Clutching his cap to his chest, Walt dropped from

kneeling on one knee to sit square on his feet. He looked more intently into the hole - hoping for any movement or sound that the wind couldn't claim as its own. He dreaded his return to camp without them. Still, only the wind cried and wiggled the cloth to taunt him.

Walt nodded, "God knows 'em." Then he whispered their names. Ruth. Ruby. Roy.

When Walt finally stood, Jule forced the shovel into the mound of earth he'd created next to the grave. Drawing in a deep breath, Walt took a firm hold of the tool. Jule stepped aside, knowing Walt must finish. Dirt sprinkled across tiny wrapped feet, as gentle as a kiss. He waited and watched. No change.

Quietly, Jule assured, "They're gone, friend."

Walt shoveled faster after the first earth reached the top end of the bundles. With his face tightening into a grimace, Walt could not bury them fast enough to be done. And then they were gone. Falling to his knees again, he pushed the shovel away. Sounds rang out as the metal bounced against stone outside the limits of their lantern light. Walt pressed the grave, packing it down, and let the earth bury his fingers. Finally, he sat back on his heels again, wiping his face with one ragged sleeve. Jule

retrieved the shovel and patched the spot with top gravel to match the area.

The grave was soon covered with white. Snow spun about the men's faces before blasting across their path. Jule rocked rapidly on his heels with numb hands deep inside his pockets. He waited quietly, enduring the frosty night alongside his friend.

Turning, Walt saw the flickering dance of flakes in front of distant lanterns hanging in the camp. The late hour caused their boots to grow heavy - still heavier as they trudged closer, so much so that the men were almost distracted from the cold. Soon, the light mocked and made them worry that everyone knew.

Jule put his hand gently on his friend's arm intending a small hard smile, just to help him steady. Walt shook him off with a nod of regret and thanks after. Offering an observation on the matter, Jule muttered, "Don't know how nobody's gonna notice them young'uns missin'."

Walt put his chin toward his chest and parted from Jule. They took different directions in the camp rows. With his children in the ground, Walt again wondered what should be done about Vivian. How could he set this right? Hope kept him from needing to decide. Maybe she told the

truth. They fell. An accident, like she said.

New snow filled the tracks while some flakes flew, following as Walt walked slowly through the muddy camp toward his makeshift home. He stopped for a moment, turning his attention to the shadows shivering for the light as wind twisted lanterns on branches or tent poles. A sad sight. Lonely howls. Such a shadowy scene should be captured on canvas, he thought. It would be a way to stop it all. Of course, he knew this musing was simply a way to avoid Vivian for a few moments longer. Tired of wiping tears, Walt slapped the last one from his cheek and went home.

Chapter 2 - Home

Just another tent in several rows of tents - good enough for road men. It was also good enough for the little towns being connected by the new road. Trains had served their purpose, but roads could be laid down unpurposed, where tracks didn't care to venture. Smells from those towns, from the people who make up the highs and lows of humanity, came wafting through the camp, always of perfume, suppers, booze, and other regrettable odors, all carried by the wind. Sometimes they ran like foul rivers beneath the boardwalks. Town folk like the road well enough, but often despise the help who camp on the outskirts - help that move their homes with them.

Each day, the end of the road inches into the distance and disappears on the horizon where heaven meets earth. It beckons people to follow. Town people had wooden houses, and some even had brick. All hoped for the road to bring them more. More happiness of one flavor or another - as if without more, there would be no happiness at all.

Walt felt a bit guilty when he entered his home. He enjoyed the smell of supper. This guilt jolted him and then subsided too quickly. That fact made him stomp the

accumulation of snow from his boots - only a shake was needed, but Walt stomped hard. He entered his home abruptly, tying the tent flap to secure it against the night. Because of his wife, it was often colder inside.

Usually Walt immediately nodded in Vivian's direction, but he had already done that when he came back earlier from his work on the road. Then, earlier, he saw her poking at the fire with her eyes fixed further. The quietness of that moment made Walt think that the children were asleep. Seemed ages ago, but it was only hours. Remarkable at the time, he thought, how quiet and soft Vivian said, "I think those babies is dead."

Like a repeater rifle, those words echoed and stung in Walt's mind. He could not yet look at her again. Slowly, he brushed snow from his cap. She had said it was too damn cold to go out, so she'd stay put and keep the stove lit while he dealt with them. "Let it alone" is what Walt had told Jule on their way to the fork with the babies and shovel. "Let it be" - as Jule fussed over Vivian's decision to stay put. Jule's eyes had narrowed, "Fire don't need lit, 'specially if she be at the funeral and not home. A mother should be at the buryin'." Jule urged Walt to go back and get her - drag her out if he must. But Walt

knew she would not go. Vivian had spoken with her nose stuck in the high air and remained by the stove unmoved.

Jule's criticism of Vivian was a reflection on Walt himself, a slap to his own character. His other half. He would own the blame if necessary. So he wrapped himself in the filth of it again. A kept-promise guaranteed order, and order meant peace. Despite his good sense he tried to forget that a decent woman would have gone with them to the fork regardless of weather. No, a decent woman wouldn't have let them fall in the first place. All three of them falling like that? Seemed unnatural. There was a stink in her story but there was nothing to do about it now.

Vivian had made stew, thicker than usual. Walt knew she had taken to burying food under the snow to keep her company while he worked - but tonight she would be friendly. Tonight she would speak of sadness being morbid. She loosed her hair, and Walt hated her for such an obvious trick. He would not so easily forget his children simply because she gave up a proper stew and let her hair fall in red swirls - which reminded him of snow swirling softly into grave darkness.

"Did ya get it done?" She did ask it, even though she could see very well that he came back alone. Walt also

noticed she now used a more pleasant tone than when he left. Surprisingly gentle, as if it had not come from her own throat. He turned his back to her, trying to get out of his jacket. "Did anybody see ya?" She waited. "Nobody better've seen ya, Walter! I gotta live with 'em!" Now her voice was back - punishing his silence.

Vivian rushed the stew onto a tin, splashing the little wooden table. The clunking sound of his plate punctuated his familiar call to supper. Walt stifled the air in his throat that want to break out of him in a slow moan. Doubling over, he held his middle and despaired. Sucking it back in, one jerk at a time, he stayed bent - and kept his back to his wife. She watched him with the curiosity of a raptor who would circle and strike soon enough. On the other hand, she knew it might take more than thick stew to get this wrinkle smooth. She let her mind rest, comfortable in the fact that he would not ask her to explain earlier events again, nor would he speak of the dead. Walt was reliable - nothing if not predictable. He would make the best of a bad situation since The Almighty kept watch.

Dawn would come as usual, so even though Walt felt a great heaviness, he knew he'd better eat. Vivian wasn't

known to give it hot twice. Across the room she busied herself making a quilt from flour sacks. Everything was saved. Every scrap, every stick, every rusty tin. From her flour sacks she made brightly colored ornaments in their otherwise dark world. The quilts sold well in towns, and sometimes her neighbors in the camp had need. Tents burned down occasionally, from drunkenness and other carelessness. Sometimes people died full of fever beneath their old quilt, which would then need to be burned. Often, people made gifts of them at weddings, or had need after birthing. For Vivian, quilting passed the time. She didn't always tell her husband the full price she got for her work - and she socked away the difference.

Walt wished she wouldn't sew after dark because then the lamp would need full flame. He couldn't have her go blind from the close work. Vivian sewed each piece carefully, eagerly stabbing the cloth with her needle in and out, over and over, in the marriage pattern, popular enough among women - consisting of double wedding rings interlocked. Locks bound together by thin thread. If it weren't for the series of threads, one in front of the other connecting before and after, the locks would unravel.

The pattern of rings reminded Walt of the empty

promise his father made years ago to his mother, before she'd agree to marry him. He said he'd get her a wedding ring as soon as he could, and his mother trusted. Typical of Walt's old man: when he had saved enough money he bought a new saddle for his mule - and nothing for his wife. For that betrayal, and many others, his mother eased her misery by devoting herself to her dear son - and so was mistaken for a bad wife. Walt tried to see Vivian now in just such a light. But justification wasn't readily available. Her mean streak was uncalled for - nothing like his mother.

Despite the winter's howl, a sickening stillness burdened their home. Harsh and punishing, lacking the noise of a family. Walt suddenly felt shame for letting tiny cries irritate him earlier that morning. The hour was quite late, and he assumed his neighbors were asleep. Usually he could hear conversations while he ate. Or he could hear dishes, dogs, drunken laughter, drunken anger, children playing, crying, or the making of more children. Perhaps this night they were all holding themselves still, trying to hear what would be said in his home.

Only Vivian disturbed the stillness. Her chair squeaked as she rocked. The pattern of her movements had the rhythm of a lullaby. She sewed and rocked, sighed and

rocked. She kept an occasional eye on the progress of Walt's digestion while the children lay in the hardness of earth, lost in the loneliness of death, with the insult of being left without any proper words. Without a marker holding their names.

Walt couldn't look at Vivian and that chestnut bribe. He barely chewed his supper, reflecting on the task that had earned him extra meat, potatoes and untied hair. Worse yet, it might not have been the actual task of burying his wife's misdeeds that bothered him most at that moment, but rather this thin deception to buy his inaction. Had he not become an accessory by eating the stew? By enjoying the sight of her? Other men would've killed her, or at least beat her and thrown her begging into the cold. Maybe that was the right thing to do, since it seemed heartless to eat and sleep, as if nothing had happened. It became more difficult for Walt to swallow, as the raptor noted.

Keeping promises was a topic Walt's mother keenly enjoyed. "Be a beast like your papa, Walter, or be like God." Walt was determined to be kind to Vivian - a godlike goal to achieve. When his mother was in a storytelling mood she related how Walt's father had chosen a downward direction, turning his back on God to become an animal.

She said his father's words became worthless the moment they left the old beast's tongue. "He could chew nails and spit out cork screws." A crooked man's words were so twisted that soon the upright found them difficult to comprehend. It took extra work and much patience to understand tangled words and mangled meanings. Without change in the better direction, Walt's mother explained, a liar soon can't speak at all intelligibly, and may as well be a mad barking dog at that point - saying nothing really - just needing to be leashed, harnessed, caged, or put down with a bullet. That was exactly what had happened to Walt's father. He uttered nothing but lies, so folk stopped listening. Too much trouble to make sense out of his nonsense. His mother didn't know which animal her husband had become. Perhaps the rooster, she said. Walt remained unconvinced that one could actually join the beasts any more than one could become God - but still, men must choose a direction to lean. So Walt refused to let his promises fail.

As Walt watched his wife carefully thread a needle with calm hands and dry eyes, he did not want to agree with Jule's accusation. The situation posed a dilemma. If she could be faulted for the deaths, then his silence betrayed

his children. What he hadn't actually promised them, he at least owed them. While studying the bits of fresh earth still clinging precariously to his knuckles or packed beneath his darkened nails, Walt knew there were many older promises to keep. Promises to Vivian. And to God. Still, the suspicion tormented and called out, cried to be given a fair hearing. To avoid any requirement to forgive her - or to act - Walt knew he mustn't believe her guilt. Otherwise he would lose everything. So he gave it every effort. Holding his head in one hand and his fork in his fist, Walt choked down his supper. His children fell, as she said.

Walt sopped the drippings from his stew with a hunk of bread and remembered he had loved her madly once. Years before, pleased tears would come to his eyes just watching her brush the shimmering hair that slid past her proud chin held high. Hair that was autumn. She stole his breath away while crossing his path, accompanied with leaves rolling along the ground as if lifting her up. She was savvy and complicated. And she stirred his blood when she looked his way. Other women might have more beauty, better manners, and God knows others had hearts, but Vivian was his. He had won her hand in a civilized battle years ago, against a handsome sailor.

That sailor - Lewis - had consumed Vivian's every waking thought, and every bedtime dream. Fortunately, her parents saw through the uniform, toothy charm and big sparkling eyes. The older couple looked directly into Lewis' soul and properly refused the lout access to their daughter. It was for her own good, but their words never penetrated her barrier of sobbing. The better man was chosen, yet she determined never to be happy. Since then, Vivian kept a carefully tended habit of treating Walt coldly - but this night her hair was loosed. Although he wanted to hate her hair, it pleased him that she offered. A rare occurrence. No need to hold her down tonight.

He studied her form and had to fight to keep from gravitating toward tender sympathy. The heart is deceitful above all else. In time, Walt felt, his kindness would soften the stone she took for a heart. Oh, how she cared for that stone, tending it as one would a flower in a garden. Walt had his own tending to do - had his mind set on fixing Vivian. On this night, he felt it useless, even silly, to think he could fix her. The idea was that kindness and patience would eventually change her mind, even turn her heart. He sighed, and oh, how he wanted to hit her. But changing minds and turning hearts were

godlike activities. Even if it proved impossible to turn her, he still would remain above the beasts who hurt and argue with women. Imagine, arguing with those barely above the beasts themselves. A man don't argue with a dog or mule. They don't speak the same language. There's a good chance of getting a battle of wills, but no meeting of minds. A wife should be loved, as an activity.

Walt reminded himself that he loved Vivian more, especially now, than could men who had loveable wives. They had it easy! Walt's kindness toward Vivian shined most when he felt like strangling her. Yet for all his loving efforts, Vivian certainly seemed to have gotten worse than better, and that fact left him utterly confused. Walt missed his mother, glad she was dead so she would never hear of this shame - to know that he tucked his children into a dirt bed outside in the cold and then ate his fill near the stove next to a wife unpunished. No, his mother would not know, and could rest peacefully.

"Break up them cradles, Walt, so I got wood sized right for tomorrow. So damn cold."

Walt sighed and pushed his plate forward a few inches. He rose from the table to stand over the cradles which he had built in warmer weather. The children would have

outgrown those beds by springtime, and he planned to get a fair price for them in town since the cold weather required they all sleep together. "We should sell 'em," Walt offered quietly, "and 'sides, it couldn't hurt to leave 'em a few days."

He wasn't done with his sentence before Vivian leapt from her chair, tossing quilt pieces to the ground.

"Useless!"

They caught the hatchet in the same moment. Walt controlled the lower portion of the handle while Vivian's small white hands flailed dangerously near the blade, pulling wildly toward her face. Walt pushed her body against the tent's center beam with his shoulder and secured the tool. It all could have come down about their heads, but swayed itself to rest. Their focus remained aimed at each other. Walt had won and lost with his swift action. He would pay dearly for taking the weapon from her - but for now she stood with her fists clenched, brow pinched and lips clamped tight. Her breath rushed from her nostrils to slap his neck before vanishing behind him.

Walt knew she would sleep sitting in her rocker that night, glaring at him until her eyes grew heavy. He stepped back, releasing her from pressing against the pole.

She came forward a bit to stand on her own while their home swayed again to rest. As Walt walked away, Vivian kicked at him several times. He managed to stay a step ahead.

Then she tied her hair.

Walt did turn the cradles into firewood before leaning the tool against the pile. Those cradles were all that remained of the physical evidence that he once had heirs, and she planned to burn them the next day. Walt went to bed alone, wanting to hold her. His thoughts turned to the hatchet. Probably he should place it beneath the mattress, but he changed his mind. If she killed him while he slept then he could rest forever - promises finally quitted.

Walt closed his eyes and tried to recall small pink faces and wiggling limbs, but could only focus on fragile, soft fingers wrapped around one of his own. This world was done with them. His senses were done with them, but his mind could still touch them, and not forget. He quietly spoke their names.

Chapter 3 - Burdens

"Mornin', Walt," Rena sang, making her way through ankle-deep snow resting heavily in her path. She strutted through the remains of the storm that hadn't blown into high drifts, but had crusted over with ice. "By midday this'll all be so sloppy we won't know how to walk. I 'spect it's gonna be sunny, Walt. You think so?"

He shrugged - not in the habit of speculating on weather. He dreaded going back to the road, working within sight of the fork and necessarily walking past it twice every day.

Rena neared Walt. Lowering her voice as if to ask in confidence, she whispered, "Good time to visit with Vivian?"

"Good as any." Walt joined the other men leaving their homes - steering in the same direction. Each day the walk became longer. Soon, they would need to move camp to get ahead of the road - watch it gain ground and pass them again. They would follow it again to the end, which never ended.

His father, as Walt remembered, at least had a good job with the railroad. He could have started as a

switchman there, but had wanted to leave town - his father's town. Walt couldn't complain about road work. He got paid daily and Boss was fair enough. While walking to the end, Walt watched trains in the distance coming and going to towns built especially for them - like the one he currently outskirted. He looked into the distance, knowing that people would settle there soon enough, in nowhere, and get back and forth by car. Everyone had gone crazy for cars.

Rena knocked on the pole holding the flap beyond which she would inflict a visit on Vivian. The flimsy structure trembled beneath her slight blows, which gave only a feeble sound. "Vivian, dear? It's Rena, honey. I've bread cheaper today. They's good for soppin' but not much else at this late date. I know you like a bargain. Vivian? You in there?"

Not one to let a little thing like silence hold her back, Rena pushed the flap forward a bit. Out of feigned politeness, she let only one eye peek through the opening. Vivian rocked in her chair where she had slept.

"I'm comin' in," Rena sang as she entered and pulled Walt's chair quite close to Vivian's rocker. "Oh, my," she sighed, "What can we do for you, dear?" Patting Vivian's

knee, she continued, "We endure loss. What else is to be done?" Rena continued with a final strong pat to signify the end of suffer-speak.

Vivian didn't acknowledge Rena's presence and wondered how many people Jule had told about her "loss." Maybe Walt was simply careless - letting people watch the burial. Regardless, the secret was out. How could it have possibly been kept anyway? Everyone knew she had been delivered of triplets less than a month ago. Vivian felt foolish for trying to hide their deaths. Still, she didn't know who told Rena, and it made her angry - an emotion for which she felt a special affinity. Turning her head slightly toward her guest, Vivian asked, "What ever do you mean?"

Rena was petite and pretty, always dressed properly. Smelled pretty, too - a scent meant to disguise her purpose. Rena rubbed the part of Vivian's arm exposed at the edge of her quilt, as if trying to apply a cream - some kind of salve for the situation. "Why don't we go into that town yonder and see what's what? We could get us somethin' nice or at least look in the winda's."

Vivian stared at Rena askance, which made her guest fidget. Finally, Rena addressed the question, "I mean I hate to see you sad. Naturally I'd like to help bring

cheer back into your cheeks." Rena smiled while slowly brushing the back of her fingers against Vivian's cheek.

Not moving, Vivian studied Rena's hard eyes - and knew. "Thank you. But there never has been cheer in my cheeks."

Rena laughed, tossing her head back, "True, you do stay indoors and wear the pale well, keepin' your own company. True 'nough."

Vivian had nothing to add. She didn't trust the sudden friendly interest Rena offered. After a considerable pause in the conversation, the visitor continued her effort to get Vivian moving. "Maybe they's gonna have a magic show or somethin' we can get in on. Watch 'em make people disappear!" She smiled wryly and studied Vivian. "That's a fine thing to do, don't you think? Makin' people disappear." Vivian stiffened and looked away. Rena continued, feeling she was getting somewhere. "But we gotta go to town. You know, ask around. Talk at people. I bet they's friendly enough. You'll like it. And if you don't wanna talk at 'em you can talk at me and I'll talk at 'em."

Vivian did agree to go with Rena even while suspecting that the conversation was more of an interrogation - and by

no means finished. On the surface, Rena appeared a friend to all. She knew everyone's business and could turn one tidbit or two into several month's worth of chatter, and those bits would naturally grow and change. Eventually, the whole camp knew how everybody else reacted to the tale, which in turn birthed further reactions branching out in wild directions. Soon, the original tale became too boring to retell, fated to shrink in comparison with all the strange or exciting reactions. The end product of the poor tidbit - however mutilated - become real. This was the dark forest Rena cultivated, but Vivian refused to provide the slightest seed.

Sadly, Rena's skills at gossip made even Vivian's stubborn silence a newsworthy note. Rena could fill a journal with suspicions about how Vivian held her head, laced her boot, how she walked with a stoop - or not stooped enough for the sad occasion. Silent determination would not be seen as its own commentary on gossip in general, nor as stoic reserve - but as wicked guilt. Innuendo and hearsay were Rena's stock and trade, from which she could create a vengeful communal jury in the camp. Still, Vivian would not participate.

Rena kept eyes fixed on the target, and did not make a

point to look about for the babies. She did take note, however, of Vivian binding her breasts with a length of cloth. She stood near the cradle pieces in the wood pile. And Rena noted the quiet before she began to chat up a storm about nothing.

While Vivian folded quilt scraps neatly in her basket, she wondered if Rena had a brain in her head since she never stopped talking. Words empty the soul. Rena must have purged her soul years ago and all that remained were echoes of words she'd already spoken. Vivian protected her soul. Kept it full of thoughts.

Rena then rattled about the time she and her man, Thom, were so mad at each other in the woods while hunting that they ignored bullets trying to buss their cheeks but went zinging past their ears. She related to Vivian excitedly how Thom finally yelled to her, "You know what that sound is, don't ya?" Rena yelled back that she did, but they continued fighting while packing up their gear. Whoever was shooting must have been going for distance since the couple didn't hear actual shots being fired - and the shooters obviously didn't see or hear their argument. There was also the chance that young boys were just shooting at birds in the air but missing, and the bullets

had to come back down somewhere. Rena explained.

"Imagine. Bein' shot at, but more important was getting' the last word in. We didn't get shot though, mind you."

Vivian didn't think they had. She said nothing, even though she was curious what the couple argued about.

Rena finally got to the point. There was always a point to her stories and friendly-type queries. She used them like foreplay. "Do you and Walt scrap much?"

While Vivian tidied her home a bit by swiping crumbs from the table, she also smoothed her hair for the trip to town. "Never."

The women eyed each other, slighting smirking - knowing. Rena could fish for details till Kingdom-Come but Vivian wouldn't bite. Rena finally ended the eyeing and smirking, then broke the silence. She turned to look at the empty bed in the corner of the tent. Her tone rose cheerfully, "Children is visitin' soon, Vivian, dear. I shouldn't mention it 'cause o' your misfortune, but it'll be nice to see 'em playin'. I don't know how long they'll stay - or if they's sick. Oh! I hope not." Then her voice lowered measurably. "Do you know anybody what's been sick?"

Vivian tossed piss-pot contents into the snow outside.

Steaming liquid made a deep yellow indentation into the snow which would turn to mud when the sun rose higher. She roughly returned the lid to the pot with a noisy clank and slid it under the bed. Rena mentioned she knew a woman who could read urine to discern an imbalance. In order to keep Rena from revisiting the topic of her misfortune or her urine, Vivian quickly asked about the visitors her guest expected soon. "Your relations coming?"

"Oh, heavens no, sweetie. My family don't know where I am. Imagine that. Ha! They wouldn't have me livin' here in this hellish wasteland - forgive my French. Perfectly good Bible word though. No sir. They'd scoop me up and haul me home. See, honey, I dropped spoons, so children is comin'."

Vivian sighed toward heaven, remembering also that the dropping of a knife and fork meant a man and woman, respectively, would visit. She had no reason to think it so, but did resolve to avoid dropping utensils - which might bring opportunities to collect burdensome friendships. What could be more overrated? Emotional spending. All that speaking. The purging of words, leaving nothing but the body with its wild unhindered senses. Disastrous. All sensible people instinctively

knew what a catastrophe that'd be. She alone, it seemed, was guarding her self, and sighed deeply while the annoying little baker of bread and purger of words continued.

Rena clapped her hands twice sharply, "I got Elva watchin' my young'ns, so let's shake a leg an' get back 'fore she thinks better of it."

Chapter 4 - Oranges

The two women wrapped themselves tightly in their coats and headed for town. Snow covered all but the longer sticks and sturdier shrubs shook themselves free. Some bent down beneath the weight. Patches of snow, thin as veils, swirled slightly between the sticks - like smoke that won't rise, held down with cold.

Rena had plenty to talk about as they crossed the stretch of prairie toward town. "We got oranges for Christmas, did you hear?" Rena clutched Vivian's arm as if to help the news reach her ears. "Oranges! That was in Cheyenne, though. This year I don't 'spect we'll get anything but mud. Mind you, I'm gonna bake bread and just give it away. Thom can't stop me. What are you going to do? Sew something?" Vivian shrugged slightly, knowing that selling quilts had served her well, but she would never entertain the thought of giving one away. Vivian didn't respond to Rena's endless prattle, and it didn't matter since the subject had a habit of changing faster than Wyoming wind.

"I lived in a house just crawlin' with vermin. It had lights, which was nice, but you turn 'em on and the walls

moved." She threw her hands up about her face and screeched, shaking her upper body violently left and right, twisting to her sides, moaning. Finally, she threw her hands down, slapping her thighs and explained, "Little tiny critters of some sort an' they was just ever'where! Enough to give ya the willies. Like all evil things they don't like the light, so pull that chain givin' 'em a dose o' light an' they scatter! Like this." She spread her fingers apart and waved her hands broadly outward. Then Rena added, "Makes you a mite dizzy at first, standin' there watchin' all the walls move. That was further east though, that was."

Vivian thought the Indians had a better system. They just rebuilt their villages after a good burning. Perhaps this camp needed burned. Nodding in agreement with her thought, she wondered if she should speak it to purge, or let it sit protected. The thought was safe, as she said nothing. But she wished she had an orange.

"My daddy wouldn't have it if he knew what my Thom put me in to live. Bugs climbed right up to eat us alive durin' the night. So we put pickle lids under each bedpost and filled 'em up with kerosene. Critters won't cross kerosene, mind you. You'll remember that, won't you

Vivian? I spose I wouldn't swim in kerosene either." She touched Vivian's arm again, "And if critters can climb bed posts they can climb blankets, too, so make certain you keep your bed covers from touchin' the floor in those cases."

Vivian was sure she would, and began feeling perhaps Rena's chatter could be useful, giving the little purger some sort of worth. Still, Vivian knew it might have been better to sit on her rocker in her tent by the stove and burn cradles while thinking on ways to punish Walt, rather than walk into town learning useful information from a woman who should not still have any useful thoughts left.

Rena reached her point again, like picking at a scab. "Some folk wouldn't wanna bring up young'ns in a place like we got here." She searched Vivian's face for a reaction, but got none. Rena pressed, "Might be doin' 'em a favor if they didn't have to endure no more." Vivian clenched her teeth and held her tongue - she wouldn't budge. Rena began to think she was talking over Vivian's head and tried to be clear. "Children is so tender, and life so damned harsh - forgive my French. Better to be put out of our misery 'fore troubles come. God knows it ain't wrong."

Vivian wondered what Sunday School Rena ever attended

to come up with that.

Rena sighed, "I hope you don't think ill of me when certain words slip out on account of passion. I had brothers - and they spoke French more than American."

Vivian didn't care. Rena always credited the French for any crude or harsh remark she uttered - even though the offending word wasn't French at all.

Rena explained, "I only use good Bible words. Not the ones 'bout relations and body business. Foul cussing, as ever'body knows, is about the marriage act and out-buildin' business. But cursing is a prayer of sorts. I don't never often cuss, and don't mean to curse nobody. That old prayer's been shortened so much its hardly knowed now."

Rena raised her hands and spoke with fervor. "Oh, God - it starts out - destroy this person or that and send 'em to eternal hellfire and damnation." She ended her example and explained, "King David done it in the Psalms. People have clean forgot how to pray."

Vivian felt this exposition on cursing prayers was the most interesting she'd ever heard from Rena. As expected, Rena tried to wheedle information. "How do you pray? Against folk? Hard to tell who's enemy and who's not when a body is bone tired. Hmm?"

Vivian answered short. "He don't wanna hear from me."

Rena tsked and sighed. "You mean He don't wanna hear what you got to say? Are you mad at Him? Maybe He's mad at you? That couldn't be it, could it?"

"I didn't say that." Vivian stepped up the pace. It was important to at least try and stay a few steps ahead of Rena. The two women crunched through the top layer of icy crusted snow with several inches of soft powder beneath. Their feet broke through and then fell hard, with a near stumble, slicing their ankles raw against razor-like edges of that crust. If they didn't reach town soon, they'd be bleeding. Vivian remembered her walks to school, certainly a longer distance in deeper snow. She liked walking to school in spring when the grass tickled her legs. But in winter the snow did take blood, when older children left her behind, hurrying as they heard the bell ring out. It was the duty of the first child who arrived to light the stove - but Vivian was never first.

She learned to appreciate each scrape then, as she did on her walk with Rena. The pain reminded her not to let her guard down and to be happy for the sunshine. That warmth on her face, in addition to the few remaining wild blooms struggling through the snow to reach the rays, had

made Vivian almost forget. She concluded that she should have stayed home, but was glad to be angry that there were no oranges. Still, there existed a small chance this town could prove interesting. There she might find a way to upset Walt, or at least bump into some no-count in the town, deserving a bit of a coming Justice. Vivian nodded to affirm her thought. Everyone needs a hobby.

Chapter 5 - Town

Vivian and Rena arrived at the edge of town. This type, small and dusty - where folk still herd livestock by the thousands through Main Street on their way to market. These particular townspeople appeared short and stocky, runted like prairie shrubs with deep roots. They were not like city folk who grow tall and wispy with their heads in the clouds and a collusive root system beneath them. That kind need the earth as mere afterthought, and are easily toppled in a strong wind, especially when young, if not firmly tied to each other. Yet the wind tries. With that kind there's also a hidden danger quietly working its evil from the inside out. If the rot takes a few, they all fall. Just a matter of time.

Vivian figured the problem of rot with trees was the same as rot with people. Too much water. That brings leisure time. Tea parties follow naturally. All that talk leaves a body a bit flimsy. Wilty people lean on each other, unable to stand firm. Swaying this way and that. Again, if one goes down, they all go. Their glory is shared, and their misery becomes contagious - which is why the affected are quickly cut off and forgotten. But these

strong stocky people on the prairie are unspoiled common folk. They survive despite others - as long as they don't trust too much.

Vivian stopped and sighed when she reached town. She saw drought - just a healthy touch of dust bowl drought - taunted by fresh snowfall to contrast against the vastness of brown. Dirt always wins, consuming the white without a fuss. These strong but sawn-off runty folk who grow thick seemed to fit right in, scratching and fighting for every fallen crumb - thankful for every stray drop of water. Vivian didn't know where she fit in. She was born tall and wispy in Kansas. Her people settled from Virginia - and so her birth decided her place. But the further west she ventured, the further she stooped and hardened.

Rena studied Vivian's sudden stop at the edge of civilization, and finally motioned to her. "It won't bite ya, honey. Come on." Even though the hour was still early, shops were busy with people purging their souls and purses. Vivian felt a bit crowded - obligated to return smiles and nods.

"Lovely day!" Rena was enraptured. Bustling stories to tell and retell with polish were found everywhere. Three legged dogs and women with birds in their hats.

Children kicking cow pies and cans. Men with fists on their hips surveying their capital kingdoms and then scraping manure from beneath their shoes. So much potential.

Rena found a ready comment regarding each person as she summed their appearance up with one glance. Vivian summed them as well, but not by what they wore, or how well they had groomed. She saw them collectively as different from herself. They bore smiles which turned to anguish when spying sparkling new objects in shop windows. This unsatisfied hunger kept them miserable. In this, they were all the same. None were a few notches above or below the other, which was something Rena claimed while ranking them. To Rena, some were worth getting to know, and others should be avoided. Vivian rejected such a subjective system. She rejected all.

A tan roadster full of a whooping, waving family beeped as they bounced down the road. Neighbors waved back, but some motioned for them to slow. Smiles turned to panic as the car hit what seemed to be a wall of feathers, as if an entire bed exploded. The driver stomped hard on his brakes, tossing his wife into the dash and his children hurling forward into seat backs. On-lookers hurried closer

to the scene. As mud dripped in clumps from the vehicle, the children whimpered. Their mother dabbed bloody noses, and their father swore. He slammed his door getting out to survey the damage, and the remains of a duck. Now unrecognizable, her brood had faithfully followed her in a straight line, with complete trust, trying to cross the road. A few ducklings survived, a bit dazed and confused.

The man picked feathers out of his grill and bits of bloody flesh from tire tread while repeating language that everyone tolerated uncomfortably but his wife. She stepped out of the car demanding in the name of all that is decent: "Calm yourself!" She picked up her baby from the floorboard - which was where the child usually travelled, nestled between her mother's feet. The child's crying made Vivian's breasts tingle and sting. She pressed them tightly with her arms to stop the leaking milk.

Rena noticed the move, and suggested Vivian could make money nursemaiding. "Some women just ain't suited for it. There's a mighty need. Some just ain't meant for it. You got a couple o' goldmines there." Rena's attention returned to the feathers still floating in the morning air. "Well, if that ain't a shame. Kinda pretty, though."

Rena tsked at the scene repeatedly while Vivian walked

away. She stopped in the long shadow of a towering white church which stood in the center of town where all roads converged. Its pointed stillness anchored the busy trade. Vivian married Walt in such a church, and felt surprised that a memory could slap her so. Despite the beauty and peace washing over her as she stood in the shadow of the building, she soon became furious thinking of her lost Lewis, the sailor that her parents ran off. Other pesky memories hadn't such power. The feeling surprised.

Her wedding was simple - an expected dividend from the day when Walt held his hat in the parlor of her family home and shook her father's hand with both of his own. His hat dropped to the floor in their excitement. Both men were so joyous that they could not stand still. Vivian's mother cried and whispered in her ear, "You'll never starve, Vivian Mae! *This* is a good man!" She followed that with the surety that he also treated his mother well.

Vivian stood silently, studying the steeple in the sky as Rena approached. "I turn round, Vivian, and there you were. Nowhere! I thought you'd done gone home." Then Rena explained how her brother went home, having died of fever because shoes were thoughtlessly put on the table. "Somebody always dies when that happens." Vivian couldn't

disagree.

Rena noticed Vivian's fascination with the church. "Do you wanna go in?" She waited, and spoke quite softly, "Is there somethin' you need to do? Get off your chest, maybe?"

Vivian wished the church bell would ring out. As a little girl, if she was early to church, the preacher let her pull the rope cord, sounding the bell as a call for worship. But she knew what lurked behind Rena's supposed tenderness. "No. Don't need a thing." She turned to leave, but slowed her pace, knowing that Rena would interpret a quick movement as running, and slow movement as the tug of conscience. Hoping to steer Rena's attention away from assumptions, Vivian observed, "Don't seem to be Sunday."

"Of course not, silly. People are shoppin'. It's Friday. And I certainly hope they're not wearin' their Sunday best. That would be sad, by the looks of 'em."

They looked fine to Vivian. Clean and comfortable. Modest and practical. Vivian let herself slip with momentary weakness and actually envied their purposeful pace. They had somewhere to go, carrying themselves with a pleasant air. And none but herself had to contend with

Rena. That too was a boon for them.

Men tipped hats to ladies and held doors. They carried packages. Some were alone, or had children in tow. All seemed so pleased to be so terribly busy. More shops opened, more doorways swept, and more customers welcomed. Despite the brisk air, Vivian wished simply to watch and imagine what was in their packages and in their minds. Surely there must be turmoil, regret and questions stirring in their brains. That interested her immensely.

Vivian had successfully shut out her companion's detailed discussion of window coverings until suddenly, Rena gasped. She spun round to stand in front of Vivian, grabbing her shoulders hard. "Oh, sweet Jesus, Vivian, don't look, but hurry." They sprinted to the other side of the street. Vivian could count on Rena to explain at length. "While you were bird watchin' or God knows what, dear, I saw women of a certain sort in that sideway comin' from an upstairs door coughin' and stumblin' and I don't know what all else, God knows, an' they came down them steps. What they got we don't want." Again, Vivian couldn't disagree.

"I hear the young ones of that certain sort get better lodgings and clothes and all their woman things 'cause

they're not sick yet, but they get booted out o' wherever they were to just go somewhere new but not so nice when they do get sick - and they all do. Get sick, I mean."

"Where'd you hear this?" Vivian asked not so much out of curiosity but to let Rena breathe.

"Oh, ever'body knows that, honey." Rena gushed with wonder.

Vivian saw the women, and they did look haggard. Their heads hurt. They grumbled against the snow for which they were not properly dressed. Hurrying from the steps, the night women hid their faces from all passersby. Daylight stole their boldness and beauty.

"Wicked things hate the light." Rena took to tsking again, having made it her business to bring all secrets to light.

Vivian let a defense escape her lips before she could guard herself, "Maybe they just need money." In one lightening action, Rena raised her eyes and dropped her jaw, letting out a tiny gasp, so Vivian added, "To feed children, perhaps." She immediately regretted mentioning children, and hated herself for being dragged into town.

Rena pursed her lips, nodding slightly. Her voice was no longer quick and high pitched, but became slow and

searching. "You think so? I would feel mighty sorry for they's childrens. Maybe they'd all just be better off dead than be raised up by drunken whores - pardon my French." After a considerable silence, Rena asked slowly, "What do you think on that, dear?"

Vivian figured that if those women weren't starving then they may simply need to punish their husbands. Otherwise they could certainly find something better to do with their time. Rena's penetrating gaze made Vivian want to run back to her tent and close herself inside the darkness, but instead, she raised her head and replied. "Not worth thinkin' on."

Rena nodded and watched the whores stumble down the street. "You're right, deary. Can't spend an extra breath on no-counts who lay round all day with their legs spread from wall to wall. Nope, no need to be talkin' so ugly - you are surely right." Her voice lowered into a sad pensive tone, "Men is practical folk, I s'pose. But those infested floozies can give a man a plague - an' if the wife back home ain't careful she gets it, too. Ain't nobody safe from punishment for that wickedness."

Vivian was certain Rena meant the drip, not the plague, and followed her up the street. Rena didn't

neglect a dissertation on the drops of silver for newborn eyes to prevent venereal disease. She also questioned the worth of parents who didn't birth their babies in hospitals in order to take advantage of such miracles if they had the chance - and of course no camper did.

The two women entered a shop full of glass and mirrors. While Rena picked through fragile stemware, Vivian slipped a shiny mother-of-pearl hair comb into her pocket, then stepped out for needed air. Waiting for Rena, Vivian strolled to the corner. There, she saw two little girls in matching crisp blue dresses with spotless pinafores over several ruffled slips. Shiny shoes clipped along the boardwalks cheerfully. Their starched bonnets bore small blue forget-me-nots. Soft curls bounced and ribbons fluttered. Vivian wondered what kind of mother fussed so.

The girls gleefully came to a particular gate with an overgrowth of hedge. The name "Mr. Fox" was printed on the mailbox. Half way between his house and the gate stood a tall, thin man in a button down sweater with a herringbone weave. The girls stopped at that gate and faced the man. He asked quietly, "Do you want candy?" They did. "Come and get it."

The younger girl looked at her older sister, who told

the man, "We're not supposed to go visitin' lest we have permission."

"This isn't visiting. Just walk on up here. It's really good."

"You were at the gate last time."

"Yes, but now I'm here."

The girls slowly walked the shadowy overgrown path toward the man, who gave each a piece of candy. Mr. Fox smiled as the girls skipped along their way, with sweetness dripping over their tiny lips and down sun-kissed chins. He promised, "Come back if you want more."

Rena joined Vivian on the corner and complained of prices. "Couldn't jew 'em down on nothin'." The two women walked along boards laid above the mud, wide enough for two. It jumped a bit beneath their feet. Rena wrapped her arm round Vivian's waist firmly, holding her close, and suggested they get their hair bobbed. Vivian stroked the hair comb in her pocket which a bobbing would make useless. Still, she could hock it one day. Rena became giddy with anticipation, feeling Thom would like the style. But Vivian knew Walt would not. So they did.

Chapter 6 - Kittens

A dispute over the road left men without work until the matter could be settled. Some stared at each other, shifting from one foot to the other. They waited for someone to have an idea of how to spend the rest of the day - but really, they just hoped the argument would end soon. They needed the money. Most decided to go into town.

Walt went to find something for Vivian. He wanted to believe she must be grieving although she hid it well. Not wasting any time, Walt entered the first shop in town he came across that sold bolts of cloth. Amidst all the choices of color and texture, Walt was certain he would make a mistake. They all seemed the same, and resembled what Vivian already had in her basket. He asked a ruffled woman behind the counter to choose, but did not know how much cloth he wanted. "My wife makes quilts from scraps an' sews clothes - dresses and the like."

The woman stiffened and closed her eyes slowly, drawing in a long bothered breath. When she opened them, she asked, "Do you want enough for a dress?"

Walt agreed and told the woman, "She's about yay high, and slim." He purchased the cloth, as well as buttons that

the clerk assured him would match well, and also enough lace for a trim collar. Walt hoped that Vivian would be pleased, and imagined an appreciative smile, perhaps an embrace, but knew better than to expect anything. He mostly knew not to expect her heart to turn with just one gift. His endeavor to repair Vivian was a steady occupation.

On his way home through the field Walt met Jule, carrying a rifle. Walt recognized the Remington as his own that he was sorry to let go, but glad to see it again. An old preacher named Castle had given it to Walt before moving north. Walt sold it to Jule for five dollars after one of Vivian's tantrums in a town more dreary than most. Since then, Walt took to hiding his pay. In this he was diligent, but the long range weapons were too large to hide.

Jule shook the rifle in the air when he saw Walt approach. "Been looking for ya, Walt. We got us some targets." They walked easily through the snow covered field. Sunshine softened the crust, and it caved easily. "What ya got there?"

"Cloth. For Vivian. Green like new grass. Gave too much for it, I 'spect."

Jule shook his head but didn't comment. He figured Walt gave up much more than money for Vivian. She deserved the back of her husband's hand - not a gift. Walt appreciated his friend's silence on the subject.

Jule brightened, "Bet ya a nickle we see ol' Thom before we see Dusty."

"Ain't got a nickle to lose. You must know where they's at, anyhow."

"I wouldn't cheat ya, Walt."

"You seem t' always win."

"That's why I like it better'n you." Jule punched Walt's arm playfully.

"You'd bet on anything."

"Yes, sir, I would. Exceptin' o' course the ways people have that ever'body knows. No fun in a bet of that sort. Like, will Verle get mean-drunk tonight, and will Sharlene spend all night lookin' at herself in that glass?" The men laughed and made several comments on the ways of their neighbors that hardly ever strayed.

Walt did take Jule's bet though, and he did lose. He tallied his losses on a paper scrap which he kept in his shirt pocket. He knew a nickel was four marks slashed through. When the paper became full of marks he would make

the other marks which spelled his name and give the paper to Jule as an IOU. He promised to pay one day, and Jule knew he would. He told Walt they'd settle the bill someday when Jule was in particular need. He'd let Walt know. Yes, Walt was honest, but Jule also knew Walt would never have the money. Vivian always found a way to keep him down, sabotaging him every time he got a bit ahead. Jule and his wife, Jennie, had set-backs as well, mostly due to Jule's gambling. It was never his wife's fault, and she gave him hell for it often enough - otherwise, he'd no doubt do it more.

Vivian was another story though. Once, Walt owned a wagon and a mule of his own - and didn't need Jule to move them down the road on his rig. But one day while Walt worked, Vivian sold them. She said she couldn't like the smell of that animal. And without the animal, there was no need for the wagon. She claimed she didn't know their worth, and showed him a handful of coins. Walt knew she did know, and that she had hidden the rest. He went to the buyer to try and get his mule back saying his woman didn't have the right. The buyer showed Walt paperwork proving that the transaction was valid.

The paper was full of words for sure, but for all Walt

knew, they were arranged in such a way as to make him out to be a fool. He exchanged sad glances with his mule from across the coral. His wagon was old and rickety, but Walt had promised his mule good care for all his days. Nonetheless, the stranger had a paper with words, and Walt had nothing.

"See 'em in the woodpile?" Jule pointed with the rifle.

Walt did. He placed his brown paper package full of cloth on a rock and Jule handed him the weapon. Walt tipped his cap back and took careful aim, then pulled the trigger. Loudness cracked and echoed, pleasing the men. Birds took flight - calling out a happiness that they were not in that woodpile. Walt repeated the process until Jule said, "Your sho' the best, Walt. Ya got 'em clean."

Walt had gotten pretty good with a .22, out of necessity. He could shoot a Sage Chicken in the head and not destroy the meat. They'd eaten thousands of them. Walt liked how they fanned their tails - gray and smaller than the farmer's yard birds, or any other game birds for that matter. He even got to like eating rabbits. But this shooting wasn't for eating.

Jule also shot, and when the men were satisfied their

work was done, they walked over to the woodpile and collected small carcasses into a bucket. "I don't understand people puttin' 'em in tater sacks and throwin' 'em in rivers alive. Clawin' each other an' screamin'. Nothin' should die like that. Gotta get rid of 'em though. Too many cats is trouble."

They had shot the kittens of several litters. Curiosity kept the furry little heads popping up from behind the logs. This method of controlling the population was less cruel than the river. It also offered the men moving targets to keep their skills sharp. "Better'n pluckin' at tin cans."

Jule appreciated this fine diversion after work. He would shoot birds and gophers, saying, "When I get to feelin' down, I just go shoot somethin' - makes me feel better." Walt would rather fish. He hadn't had the time, though, except in summer when days were long.

"Oh, damn." Jule held one kitten up by its tail. Its neck dripped blood down a front paw to the ground as its head was missing. "Jennie made me promise not to get her favorite one."

"This one here?"

Jule grimaced and nodded. He looked at Walt and

asked, "Ya know where we can get another red one this size?"

Walt shrugged, "Nope. Maybe she'll think it ran away. Or got ate by somethin' else."

Jule buried the red one, and threw the others to his dogs after cutting out the slugs if they didn't go clear through. "I surely dread Jennie finding out what I done."

Walt nodded, but said nothing. He collected his package and headed home. When he arrived, Vivian wasn't there. As a result, supper wasn't ready. He stood for a moment glaring at her rocker, which he built for her when first told she was with child. He momentarily enjoyed a thought to chop it like he'd done the cradles and add the pieces to her wood pile. Then, he noticed she hadn't touched any of the wood she insisted on having the night before. And the stove was ice cold. He checked her belongings and quickly found that her brush and mirror were still there. That was a relief. It wasn't like her to be gone too far unless she packed. In those cases he'd have to go after her.

Instead of destroying the rocker, Walt went out front with his shovel and started digging a trench. He'd been meaning to do it for some time, but since he was waiting on

supper he could dig before the sun left him. His trench quickly filled with water from saturated ground. Walt wanted to dry out the top layers to chase away the mud. He channeled his trench down both sides of his tent to the field behind which led to the creek. The incline guaranteed that his ground would be dry unless a sizeable flood came from the high side. Wetness like that brings a cough, and coughing brings fever, which brings the grave. Their home would now be a bit more dry and warm. He was certain that Vivian would be pleased, but knew she would say nothing. There was also a chance she would dam his trench or reroute it to flood their home. He tried to think of a place where the shovel could be put out of sight.

When Vivian finally did come home, Walt's stomach forgot to complain for the hunger the very moment he saw her hair. There was about a hand width over her forehead, but the part that pierced his sensibilities most was that the rest of it was chopped to just under her ears. The ends flipped forward down the line of her jaw like double daggers pointing at his heart. Fortunately he couldn't speak at first, but when he could, he remembered his promise. He didn't comment on the missing hair, but

rather, asked words that stomped out fast and harsh, "You 'bout ready to get my supper?"

She looked the ditch over and put her nose in the high air before entering the tent. Walt couldn't tell if her grin was due to his work or to his upset. She would naturally see both as triumphs of her own. Rena, on the other hand, couldn't understand this form of communication. She asked in sing-song, "Well, Walt, how do you like our hair?"

Walt turned toward Rena, stabbed the ground hard with his shovel, and then continued his trench building with more vigor than before. Rena slipped home, having much to tell her neighbors.

A few moments later, Jule hurriedly approached, "Walt! Walt, I gotta tell ya."

Walt interrupted, "Did you pass Rena? See her hair?"

"Damn shame is what that is. Bet ya a nickle six more women do it 'fore next week's out." Jule looked at Walt's work. "Nice ditch ya got there. I'll get me one, too, if'n the sun holds out a few more hours. Good thing we got let go early today."

Walt went on about the hair. "Vivian did it, too. I've a mind to talk to Thom 'bout keepin' Rena home."

"She won't stay put, and then Thom will have t' get on her 'bout it or else be owin' you. Messy. That's all I'm sayin'."

"Didn't you want to tell me somethin'?"

"Right! Listen, I just heard from Fran who works with them surveyors. No easy way to say it, Walt, but somebody wired off that you had three babies and now you don't. The Sheriff from Torrington is comin' next week - he's busy with trigger-happy robbers presently. Maybe Dillinger himself - don't know. That's the business to be in I 'spect."

Walt swallowed hard and stared into his trench. He shuffled his foot over the mound on either side. Jule, being a patient sort who wouldn't walk against a moment like this unless his friend sent him away, stood ready - awaiting instructions.

After some time, Walt asked in a cracked whisper, "What'd you think of Vivian's story?"

"You know what I think. They fell? Don't think much 't all of that story, Walt. Not much 't all."

Walt drew in a deep breath and studied his ditch further. He nodded, and shook Jule's hand, "Thanks for tellin' me. 'Bout the Sheriff."

Jule didn't let his hand go, but instead pulled him closer and whispered, "What you need, friend?" He saw Walt's eyes, sad and scared again, so he repeated more quietly, "What you need?"

Walt suffered the words out of his throat, "My mess to tend."

After a moment, Jule slapped him on the shoulder, "You been fair with me, so I got to say, you gonna need a plan. This ain't like her other nonsense." Walt shook his head, and Jule sighed. "Anything you need, ya hear? You come get me." He spun on his heel, and made sure he continued to speak softly. "If you change your mind you know where I am. I'll be thinking on it."

Walt turned and saw Vivian, in the shadows, framed by the tent opening. He didn't suppose supper was ready, but knew that she had heard Jule speak of the Sheriff. Walt would protect her, as usual. There was nothing else to be done.

Chapter 7 - Gussy Up

Word spread of a pig roast and dance to be held in town. Saturday night get-togethers could depend on being met with a mighty welcome. A sizable army of church women marched to the camp, heavily armed with freshly baked goods. Their mission: to invite the road workers and their families to the dance. They sang a mix of old Dixie tunes, older church hymns, and a few high-steppin' new ditties that Vivian didn't recognize.

These churched townswomen caused quite a stir in the camp, exciting all. Vivian had the intention of avoiding conversations by slipping away from all the commotion, after managing to snag a piece of their pie offering. Even though she did enjoy a good pig roast, she sighed deeply at the thought of a dance, and purposed to be ill. She felt confident that Walt would bring her a plate of food after dancing was done.

Vivian's interest in crowds stood minimal at best, but her curiosity piqued when she learned that the town had factioned into two camps - so to speak - and had battled it out all day. Initially, the dispute regarded whether or not to invite road workers to their little shindig. The

annual celebration typically honored their town's founding members, but some were hell-bent to focus on prohibition's impending and final swan song. Some counties were still dry, but not all.

Certain elements wanted separate festivities, while others insisted theirs take priority. Such a town split, with all sides impassioned and claiming they'd been done wrong, could not be but interesting. Vivian could work her magic and perhaps start a fist fight or two. People are so fragile and trusting, laying themselves bare. Watching rumor and misinformation infect and spread was the kind of spirited dance that got Vivian's blood pumping - as long as she was not the subject. Actual dancing simulated the push and pull of relationships, either intimate or societal. Vivian had no use for either. She nibbled on her pie while standing in the camp rows with the crowd - straining to hear the details of their discord.

It didn't take long before Rena had alerted everyone to the facts. It seems the Methodists had fired the first shot. The fire-breathing Baptists brought up the opposition. Of course, by distributing cinnamon rolls and strawberry tarts, they and their leader took the high ground. The conflict also involved Lutherans,

Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the town's little band of Catholics. All took sides, but none wanted to be on the same side as the idolatrous Catholics, and effectively shunned them.

When the non-church goers, as well as the outright heathens, threw themselves into the ring, the churched combatants tried to charitably bring as many of that hell-bound fringe as possible into the fold - more precisely, onto their side - going for numbers rather than dogma. Vivian had attended church as a youngster, but hadn't remembered it to be so intriguing. Finally, the Lutheran man donating pigs had become so insulted he retaliated by threatening to withdraw the offer - causing peace to be quickly restored.

Stakes were high. Some feared rowdy transient road worker behavior while others simply worried over food supplies. Christian duty won out. In the end, the issue was not about whether the campers would be invited, but who could get to them first. In the end, all claimed victory - with varying methods and degrees of praise and thanks giving. They would celebrate the town's founders, and those who wished to toast the end of prohibition could do so discreetly.

The camp bustled with activity as people prepared for the dance. Children were taught a few steps, and sternly reminded of manners so no one would question their upbringing. Crisp shirts and dresses were pressed using chunks of smoothing iron set on the stove to heat red-hot. Some irons had a wooden handle which spun round the iron grip, yet a few were cracked or had chips of wood missing. The women used thick cloth so their fingers wouldn't burn. Typically, fingers were already bloody from washboards, and blistered from ringing the heavier garments of excess water by hand. Women were used to this, so spirits remained high in anticipation of the dance. Final touches were always needed somewhere - strengthening loose buttons, or quickly whipping up a hem.

With the clothing prepared, women baked whatever they could manage. One mustn't arrive empty handed. They bathed, washing away dirt and worries - just for the evening. They twisted hair into pleasing arrangements, and many women colored their lips and cheeks. They did this without feeling cheap, despite the sour glares from certain neighbors. Some held to the view that "only hussies gussy up." Others quoted a notable minister who once remarked from the pulpit regarding rouge and powders: "If the barn

needs paintin' - paint it."

With a few hours remaining, it was time to wash the children. A pecking order existed for the tub of water, from the oldest grandmother to the youngest child. Children were then scrubbed and threatened to be skinned alive if they got dirty again before the dance. Women who had not borne children yet helped the women who had.

Finally, the men came home from the road. Having gotten word of the dance, they stepped lively, knowing they would be expected to bathe as well - and would have precious little time. Women hurried their men into the warmed water that they had added to the cold. Tubs for bachelors were prepared by older women, as they had extra time and would not be suspected of impropriety. If those men refused help, and some did, they were left to spit shine themselves from a basin. Most of the water always slopped out of a tub when men bathed - either their knees bounced against their chins or legs were left to dangle out in the air. Soaps and perfumes were shared until all were ready.

It was the first dance for some of the blossoming children. They were given special attention. Mothers doted on the placement of each lock of a daughter's hair,

and the alignment of a son's trouser crease. Vivian remembered her own excitement, quite long ago, as her mother readied her for presentation. She knew her mother would roll over in her grave if she saw Vivian now. Several families no longer had nice clothes, having sold them or necessarily left them behind when the bank took their house.

Looking into her glass, Vivian yearned for her missing hair which would have been braided and wrapped around her head - but she had lopped off her crimson crown the day before to punish Walt. She ran her hands down her sides, seeing how the blue polka dot dress hung loose. She'd lost some curving since the last time she'd occasion to wear it - just when, she couldn't say. Then Vivian wished she'd used her new green cloth to make a dress - she did have time the night before. But when Walt gifted it, she gave him back a purposed lack of emotion. In fact, no reaction at all. Walt had seemed a bit lost when he left it on the table to go back outside and finish digging his ditch. It could never be said her husband didn't try to please. A twinge of remorse bothered and surprised her. She wasn't certain if it were entirely for Walt, or due to the lack of a new green dress.

Walt lathered his face with his fine badger hair brush with the carved bone knob. It was old - his grandfather's. Sentimentally, Walt refused to get a new one, even though he usually found more badger hair on his face than his own while shaving. Vivian enjoyed watching the long razor run slowly across Walt's jaw line and neck - the white lather being slapped from the blade into a corner of their home, then dipped back into the chipped porcelain basin to rinse. He trimmed his mustache and sideburns with care while she waited.

He could feel her eyes on him, but knew she would bolt away if he took his own eyes from the mirror. Shaving, Walt knew, was the only time Vivian let herself study him. With his gaze busied at the glass, and his shirt tossed over a chair, she watched his muscles flex and roll tightly across his back and down his arms with each taut movement. Strong veins bulged from his shoulders and arms as the razor and scissors steadied for their task. She felt it interesting how the razor itself lay quite gently in his grasp. His fingers spread wide, moving with the lines of the instrument as a conductor moves an orchestra playing a long, slow song.

Vivian found the sight of Walt fascinating - which

made her feel guilty, as she still longed for her sailor. Promises were made to Lewis - promises to be faithful - which she intended to keep. Enjoying her husband or liking him even a little would be a betrayal to her love. She averted her eyes as Walt lifted himself straight after splashing his face with water from the basin, and she turned her back on him as he reached for a towel. Vivian remembered the new razor and brush set she stole from a barber shop now hidden in the bottom of her sewing basket. She planned to throw away Walt's sentimental old set one day, and replace it with the shiny new kit. Of course, she'd do this only when it suited her tactically. He would certainly feel a delicious loss.

Crossing the field toward town, Vivian smelled foods that made her glad she hadn't made the effort to be ill. Walt tried to take her arm in his, but she shrugged him off. He felt he was walking too fast for her, but she had purposely slowed, to kick at him - so he sped up. He didn't understand her fondness for this singular habit, but he'd seen shepherds bounce small stones near sheep to turn them. Perhaps this is what his wife was trying to do. Humiliating nonetheless.

They passed a young couple firing heated whispers at

each other. Apparently, the woman did not want to be embarrassed by her husband's coarse ways. This reminded everyone passing by that a family's dirty laundry should be aired only in private. Vivian wondered why the angry couple did not fear the purging. Words come from dark places. God's first words came from the darkness, and they brought light. Since then, every word rises from individual darkness to flutter about helplessly in the light.

Most couples locked arms and crossed the field carrying baskets of food: cabbage and turnips, cheeses, dressed eggs, bean dishes, and cakes sprinkled with sugar. Others could only spare a single can of rutabaga preserves, perhaps some piccalilli relish, or batch of eggnog. Some had nothing.

Vivian and Walt brought a jug of dandelion wine that Jule had given them earlier in the summer. Walt and Vivian kept it corked, since neither of them liked to lose reason - one of the few things they had in common. Besides, Jule said it was best if left bottled for a whole year. He loved to talk about the "teeth of the lion," and his special recipe. He preferred to boil apricots, but rhubarb would do. His children helped him collect petals, and

sometimes he'd have Jennie cook up the young leaves while still tender - better than spinach, he'd say.

All adults were to attend the dance, except those who were stove up with some illness. Single men ambled across the field, trying to look disinterested, but were eager to wet their whistles with liquor. Young boys looked as if they would be ill from nerves. The young girls could not contain the energy building in their bodies. They quaked and trembled, bursting regularly into a succession of tiny bounces, and some bit their nails nervously. Older girls knew it was paramount to hold oneself still, and did so admirably. All the unmarried were quite aware of the travails caused by getting the hot blood - yet some didn't care. Women with no intention of dancing or imbibing were charged with the honor of chaperone.

Children too young to attend the dance - usually six and under - were given a few drops of Hot Toddy. A few shots of this medicine made people feel rather well. It was typically made with hot water, tea, lemon, honey and bourbon, but with supplies as they were, there was only enough honey to help the whiskey go down - and the whiskey was needed to help them sleep. The rest of the family was then free to go dancing after these young ones were tucked

into bed with a solemn warning to stay there and keep quiet lest the wild dogs tear them asunder.

Lanterns shone brightly and music grew louder as the road workers and their families approached the town lights. A flurry of activity welcomed the campers and directed them to where their dishes could be placed for sharing. Several rows of tables with unmatched cloths were set to receive the food, and chairs were brought to line the dance floor. Men put planks down and secured them together best as could be managed. A few horses were brought in to parade round the floor to test the planks. None split, slapped, or rose dangerously to snag a dancer. This flooring would still vibrate with the music, adding to the excitement, encouraging men to hold their partners tight.

Still, calamity threatened to come before the dancers. A small boy wandered beneath a horse, which did not bother the beast until the boy tripped and grabbed its tail to steady himself. The horse started and tried to see what was amiss between its legs. The boy fell on his back, staring up at the massive belly of horse wildly trying to get away. It tried to avoid stepping on the youngster at the same time. The boy closed his eyes, thrashing his arms and legs about the inside of the horses legs, trying to get

back on his feet. All the while the horse picked up its hooves high and stomped them down again in order to pick up a different hoof. This dangerous dance was accompanied by screams and swearing from those standing helplessly by until the boy could be dragged out from under. The horse came to rest and nudged the boy who was coughing up the dust raised - but otherwise unharmed. A special trough of boards was then built between the nearest church and the place where the band would play so that the piano could be wheeled easily. Ragtime for sunset, and Gospel by sunrise.

A line of church leaders prepared to give thanks for the food. They seemed a bit embarrassed that they hadn't discussed earlier which one of them would have the honor. Finally, it was suggested they flip a coin, leaving the outcome to God, but each worried that the winner would feel, and be seen, as divinely favored. It was then decided each would take turns, in alphabetical order. The coin was employed to determine who would dutifully clear his throat when the fifteen-second time limit was reached. Long-winded preachers spit out words with such speed to make Gatling proud, while others went for volume and drama. Vivian felt God must be amused. She appreciated the few who kept their bit short, to the point, and delivered with

sincerity.

The only place Vivian had seen this level of pointless competition was between professors in Kansas - friends of her father. They fought fiercely for what, to them, seemed so terribly important. Everything these men believed about themselves was bound up in receiving recognition for some obscure academic point. Can a man stick his flag in an idea? These rivalries seemed akin to tussles between children over a little mound of dirt. Contenders scrap wildly until the bruised, bloody and panting victor covered in mud and sweat holds the summit alone, proudly spreading his arms skyward to shout his claim as king of the mountain.

In all competitions, Vivian secretly rooted for the one most deserving, which is usually the one who never seems to want it enough to win. Still, there must be a winner, even if the fight is foolish. Losers are just as important as the winners. Vivian remained well aware of that fact - having been taught the piano as a girl. The silence between notes is vital. It stood to reason: one cannot be king, if no subjects exist. So many people vie for the loudest note. Somebody must save the music and be silent.

Chapter 8 - Dancing

After God blessed the meal, the band attempted a toe tapper. "Hawaiian War Chant" fit the bill. Glowing ladies generously served supper to those who moved down the rows of tables, choosing between various dishes or sampling all. Walt focused on venison, fish and spuds. Vivian chose fritters and rice with a dab of slaw. She topped that off with apple pie, which Jennie made and called a fricassee - which was not a fricassee, but it was fun to say.

Seating was always a problem, as Vivian cringed at the thought of sitting near anyone making small talk. And God knows Walt could not be counted on to carry a conversation. Those with a gift for gab were already surrounded - or they effortlessly tracked down an audience. Town folk wheedled in to sit amongst outsiders. In Vivian's view, all this friendliness smacked of unsolicited fraud. Bothersome, even if honest. Fortunately, she secured the end of a table with less traffic, offering a greater likelihood of being overlooked. She waited there while Walt hunted up some punch.

Vivian's sharp eye didn't waste time noticing a lone young man sitting on a fence, somehow balancing his plate

on his knee. His face was badly pockmarked, but he wore his hat tipped back at a "devil may care" angle. She found this pleasing. The man also noticed her, between bites of potato salad. They shared a glance which lasted too long. Looking away, he sank his teeth into fried chicken, tearing it apart with grease-soaked fingers. Vivian knew he would look her way again, and when he did, he grinned. She was ready for it, and raised her chin slowly. This time, he did not look away.

Walt returned with two cups of punch. He thought, "You're a sight, Vivian, a lovely sight." His eyes searched her and he almost told her - despite her lack of hair. She saw Walt take a breath as if about to speak, but no words came. She sighed and looked past him. A few townspeople came near their corner of the long table to exchange polite greetings - then they discussed amongst themselves how a skinned bear laid out on its back with its limbs strewn here and there looks almost human.

They were joined by a fetching woman who wore a fine wolf-skin collar. Men could make quite a good living by poisoning wolves - so numerous. That wasn't as satisfying as shooting them, but then the pelts were ruined. The woman complained about the fuel used to fire the pit.

Townsmen argued that using cow pies dropped on the prairie made the meat taste better - no need for seasoning. The woman demanded that wood replace the prairie fuel without delay, as cattle leavings were for uncultured cowhands and vagabonds. Besides, she argued, their gathering wasn't far enough away from the pit to escape the smell. The men maintained that the taste of the meat was more important. A vile whisper left the woman's lips and met their ears.

Walt and Vivian watched eyes pop and shoulders droop in defeat before the men excused themselves to tend the fire. Walt enjoyed the meat. He waved off a random duck feather still blowing on the breeze. Vivian was glad they had the end of the table to themselves again.

A few men were organizing judges for an egg toss and pie eating contest. It'd be funnier, one said, if they were blindfolded and their hands were tied behind their backs. Irish tea flowed freely amongst those watching the arm wrestling. People were already tipsy. They would become mad, bad, sad, silly or sleepy - according to individual temperament which they typically restrained while sober.

One man, who started tipping earlier in the day - for the cause of celebration, of course - swayed more than

others when the beer began gushing from his pores like rain. He had been slinging uninhibited compliments at every woman who passed, until he passed out. He let sail one final whistle which did not complement the current ditty played on the air by the musicians. He got carried away.

Light-footed folk left their food and scooted hand in hand to the dance floor. Others finished their meals enjoying every bite and chatting amongst each other. Most of the couples looked extremely happy, even giddy - and the singles were hopeful. On the dance floor, a flutter of skirts spinning and disappearing behind other dancers made the scene look like a meadow of flowers in springtime, opening for the earth rather than the sun. Dancers locked eyes onto each other lovingly, regardless of earlier squabbles and trouble.

Walt longed for a dance with Vivian, but she studied the fence-sitter who ate his corn on the cob. Butter dripped down his chin, and he wiped it away with his sleeve. "I'm tired," she told Walt, and suggested he dance with one of the ladies huddled at the end of a table discussing everything from disagreeable cockleburs to how daisies and buttercups spoil hay. They also had enough words to make plans for the approaching Christmas holiday.

Walt thought it improper to dance with anyone but his wife. Even though those women would probably accept an invitation, and their husbands would pretend to never mind, Walt remained in his seat.

Other men walked backwards and pulled their wives toward them, only to push them away again and step forward, which forced the smiling women to retreat - being moved by the slightest touch upon their waists. Ladies would turn as if to leave their men, but the pursuer would pull and wrap them under their protective arm. Drawing delicate hands closer to his body a man could gently nudge her where he wished. Their eyes smiled, and they held hands. Like lovers, they moved as one - a balance of opposing forces in agreement. The faster they spun, the closer and tighter he necessarily held her so she would not fly away and collide with others. From such a stumble, a couple could not easily recover. A woman could be pushed, pulled, grabbed and thrown about a dance floor all night long - and with each step, fall more deeply in love.

Walt felt happy for them and reached for Vivian's hand. She shook him away and lifted her chin toward the fence. Walt noticed and was not surprised. Vivian had a long history of hunting and hurting. The young man on the

fence stopped eating his apple pie to study the tension between the couple, determining that Vivian's smiles were not legit. Walt nodded a greeting toward the fence, and the man pleasantly touched the brim of his hat their way in return, then went to sit with girls his own age. He flashed a disdainful scowl at Vivian, who was not ashamed. She took a candle from the table and decided to stroll around town - thinking perhaps she'd start a fire.

Walt fended for himself amongst minglers for some time until he thought he'd take Vivian a soda - if he could find her. The evening air harmonized with a perfect cool temperature for the festivities. The sky seemed close, like a hovering embrace. A stillness could be breathed in, despite the band and bustle.

Walt passed by chairs upon which the elderly sat and clapped their hands, tapping their toes in time to the music and smiling broadly. They sang along: *"Any time the thunder starts to rumble down, don't let hope tumble down...Life can be delish, with a sunny disposish."* He passed the line of chairs warmed by single women and girls waiting to be asked for a dance. Musicians stood or sat on stools, strumming and slapping their tune.

So easily given over to sentiment, Walt enjoyed the

sight of each of these. A few ladies spoke with signs, moving their hands and fingers in a graceful way that was a dance all unto itself. It reminded Walt of how the old Indians had spoken to each other - a language that all the tribes knew and so could communicate with each other. But that wasn't as pretty as what these ladies spoke.

Lanterns swung overhead in the center square of the town, strung in a large circle for the gathering, leaving the rest of the town in relative darkness. Fireworks were planned, but boys with the devil in their eyes had stolen them, causing quite a scuffle between fathers of all the known troublemakers - each blaming the other's ruffian as ring leader. They had no idea where their youth would be hiding, and insisted their particular hell-raiser not be accused simply because of minor past transgressions. Walt wandered to the pit where bawdy men laughed at crude jokes and sliced the meat from pigs to put on trays and mix into the chili at the feast.

When Walt was young he'd visit his uncle's butcher shop. He remembered well the plump bodies hanging from their heels to bleed out with their bellies slit throat to groin. When given a gateway, intestines push themselves out as if blossoming, rolling and tumbling from the carcass

in wet, smooth and shiny loops and rounds, connected as one, varying in color from pink to purple and green with yellow, but mostly a glistening gray. Beautiful, in its way. Ribs, white, and covered in a slippery transparent film set against a red interior, would be scraped and split. Ears and snouts, hooves and tails were collected in bowls. Live ones, squealing for their turn, toddled about on short legs - with ears flopping in rhythm to their hooved steps and to the chorus of sharpening knives. Then their throats were slit, which stopped the squealing and another balance of agreement was found. Butchery brought stench and plenty.

Walt moved on and saw several women clustered beneath a tree. Each had an infant in arms. Some of the babes rested their heads on mother's shoulders as the women gently rubbed and patted their tiny backs. Others laid their heads in the crook of an elbow with their bodies trustingly resting along the arm and hand that cradled them securely. Fingers of the other hand lovingly stroked a child's hair, and a few were still feeding. Women turned their backs to Walt if they saw him. These women spoke to each other in quiet tones and had sparkling eyes. Others hummed quiet private tunes with their eyes closed. Each

looked content and most peaceful. Their bodies swayed slightly, left then right, rocking their children to sleep. A few women sang softly with the band, "*Blue days, all of them gone, nothin' but blue skies from now on.*" The scene would have made a lovely painting. For quite some time, Walt watched this very slow and tender dance. He missed his children.

Chapter 9 - Hellfire

Vivian felt safe in shadows outside of the celebration but still held her candle to light her path. She wandered back to Pontiac Street where she'd obtained her hair comb, and also where she'd had her hair bobbed with Rena. Such irony. Neither shop deserved to be torched tonight, since neither could be blamed. They didn't mean to provide something useless.

Hearing a bit of commotion around the corner, Vivian blew out the flame with a quick puff. She peeked around the edge of the building, hidden by darkness. Turning the same corner as she had before, Vivian again stood before the row of shotgun houses, where doors aligned throughout from front to back. The tall, thin man stood again in his doorway beyond overgrown hedges, holding a bulging bag. He waited, as the same two towheaded girls came up the street stepping lively, and stopped at his gate. He held up the bag and smiled, "Just as I promised."

The two girls looked at each other and the older one asked timidly, "Please bring it here, sir. We're not supposed to - ."

"It's not that much farther than you walked the last

time." He took a piece of candy from the bag, held it up for the girls to see, and then he put it on his tongue. Little mouths watered as the girls watched him. They stepped through the open gate and walked up the path to his doorway. He backed himself inside his home - and they followed. Then the door closed.

Vivian crossed the muddy street. She entered Mr. Fox's yard and went to a side window. Straddling a large bucket containing gardening tools, Vivian peered inside. The man sat on his haunches to be eye level with the girls who pointed to the bag now set on his desk. He scowled with disapproval and shook his head. They would have to wait. Then the man smiled at the smaller child and asked for a kiss.

Vivian reached for a trowel or snips in the garden bucket but had trouble seeing in the shadows. The tools rattled about, which caused someone's dog to bark. Vivian saw the older girl put her hands on her hips, and Vivian could hear her yell angrily, "Don't you kiss him, Ellie! Don't you do it!" Her fury turned to the man as she jabbed a tiny finger at him, "You're a liar, and I'm telling my mother!" She quick-stomped to his door while the man fell forward onto his knees, reaching for her - but he failed.

His fingers barely brushed her skirt. The younger girl looked concerned, but simply sucked hard on two of her fingers for comfort. The door slammed and the tiny shiny shoes clip-clopped with a fast rhythm on the boardwalk.

The man stood distraught. He seemed confused, holding his head while turning a few circles like a dog chasing his own tail. He then ushered the smaller child out to the other side of his gate. He told her to go. Hurrying back inside his home he put out the lights.

Vivian lamented her flameless candle, but found a weeding fork and slipped it into her pocket. Moving to the front of the house, she knocked softly on the door and called sweetly, "Mr. Fox?" He didn't answer, but hid behind his pleasant walls where he thought himself so clever - outsmarting little girls. But he was undone by a tattler.

Vivian tried the doorknob, which turned easily in her hand. Most people don't have locks on their doors - a sign of too much trust, or too little treasure.

A thrill surged through Vivian's body knowing the moonlight must cast a fine silhouette of her body in his doorway. He could most certainly see her, but she saw only blackness. She could feel his eyes, and smell his fear.

"Mr. Fox," she whispered.

The light began dimly but did not rise to full brightness. He kept his hand on the small brass dial, and offered cautiously, "You should keep them home. Coming round here bothering me - it isn't right."

Vivian grinned and patted the forked spear in her pocket. "I was just hoping you could spare some sugar."

He hesitated before answering. "Yes, of course." Stepping back into his kitchen he opened a cupboard, then dusted an empty jelly jar with his shirt. Vivian moved forward, to be seen more clearly. Blinking his eyes, the man stammered, "Do I know you?" Taking note of her clothing, the fashion of a few years past, Fox nodded, "You're from the camp." He began to spoon sugar into the jar.

Vivian corrected him. "I meant sugar from the bag." She smiled broadly while her eyes narrowed. "I want candy."

A knowing spark flashed in the man's eye, just as Vivian clasped her weapon tightly in her fist. She swung her left arm wide to distract him as the thick fork in her right swung low, scooping toward his groin. She wasn't able to finish the motion, as the front door burst open,

startling both Vivian and the fox.

Three men with determined pinched expressions rushed in and barely took notice of Vivian. She stepped aside with sugar on her shoe. The fox had dropped his jar, but the crashing noise could hardly be heard as the men shouted, "Hold him!" Behind them entered a few women, led by one who looked to be the mother of the girls. She filled the darkened room with sunlight, as her daughters had.

An old hickory bat to the ribs felled the man. On his way to the floor, Fox's feet jumped a few inches with each punch. The men took turns, but didn't get in each other's way. They wore themselves out in concert, which looked like jazz - a coordinated chaos moving toward one goal. It took Fox quite a long time to make it down to the floor and curl like a baby, protecting his pained parts from further blows, but his back and legs were exposed to the encore of kicking. Cowboy boots leave a deeper bruise than regular shoes. As a finale, both his hands were held to the table and smashed with an iron rooster doorstop that the smaller woman thought would work nicely for the job. He screamed and sobbed but no one cared.

The other woman had a thick accent. She asked Vivian,

"What business you have wid de letch?"

"I came to borrow sugar."

"You take all." She stepped over the beaten man moaning on the floor as an older sweating man growled about the innocent and the hellbound. The woman came back from the kitchen carrying the canister of sugar but was stopped by a man quite out of breath.

"No! We take nothing." Another sharp kick followed his words. "Let it never be said he made us rich."

The reference to Abraham was not lost on the others, as they nodded in agreement. The woman holding sugar looked at the canister, then at Vivian. She sighed and put it back in the kitchen. She stood impressively large. Her skeleton alone probably outweighed the other woman, and possibly the men as well. She was every bit of eighteen hands high and weighed at least twenty-five stone. Vivian thought she must have been fully one stone at birth, and probably killed her poor mother in the effort. With a deep chuckle, the strong woman's hands fell to the fox like meat cleavers. She yanked him from the floor and dropped his ragged, godless body into an overstuffed chair. "I nurse you."

Vivian marveled at the woman. Such power. She hoped

a more permanent end would be secured for Fox, since some people just don't learn. Talk is useless when the man already knew he was wrong. Talk merely postpones the villain's brand of trouble. She grieved for Justice long enough to put her weapon on an end table. Dirt sprinkled over a "Popular Science" issue declaring that a giant atom exploded and created the universe. Vivian saw the man's problem right there. Her pocket now had enough room for his paperweight - carved ivory elephants parading across the design.

On her way out, the bloody rooster doorstep caught her eye. Vivian knew that Walt often became lost in thought while staring at roosters - although she wasn't sure if he liked or feared them. She could never tell. He bore the same long face whether happily sentimental or sadness poured like drizzly rain. Either way, the rooster strutted into Vivian's hands - perfect for Walt. She planned to wash the blood from its base at waterside and return to the dance. Too big for a pocket, she wrapped the rooster in her skirt and snuck out the door while the avengers had a stern word with Fox about his future in their community.

Vivian passed the two girls, comfortable in their ignorance. The one sucking her fingers swung on the gate

as her sister, the sweet-toothed tattler, stood on the stoop with her hands on her hips. She hollered to her mother still inside the house. "Did you get the candy?"

Chapter 10 - The Lord's Day

A particular preacher, the Reverend John, had circulated amongst the campers at the dance to announce he would give a special sermon just for them on Sunday afternoon - after he lunched at the home of an Elder and visited a few widows. Four o'clock, he imagined, when the sun would still be agreeable.

Benefits to campers were numerous. They could sleep late after their night of drinking and dancing, and would not need to gussy up again. Clearly, the Reverend John benefited also. If the campers attended church in town, they would be spread out amongst the various faiths, and of course, some would be tempted to stay home. On the other hand, if he came to them, the people would learn the Truth without meddlesome fringe and false faiths muddying their minds. He would have them all to himself. It was real Divine inspiration - and it took the other church leaders most of the afternoon to figure out why not one camper attended their services.

The Reverend John, dressed in a black suit and bolero tie cinched tight, carried his frayed Bible through the field. Swiftly, filled with purpose, he walked under his

Stetson and atop his mail order snakeskin cowboy boots, which pointed the way. Following him was his red-headed wife with a worn hymn book and freckles. Following her was one of the musicians who played the night before - a one-eyed cousin and his fiddle. The eye was bloodshot.

Reaching the edges of camp, the reverend John stopped to look over the scene. He grimaced and determined right then that he had finally seen it all. Over his shoulder he sternly decreed to his followers, "God should kick me for not comin' here sooner." He picked a piece of pot roast from his teeth. "The good Lord puts these poor folk in my path and I do what?"

"They've only been here, I think, four days?" His wife tried to remember when the grocer had received a double shipment of supplies - gushing with anticipation of extra business.

The Reverend John continued, "I do what I always do. I wait on somethin' extraordinary to happen so I can be of mighty use. Sure, I get the occasional tornado and mad dog rascal shootin' the town or maybe an unruly husband run amok needin' a whippin' - but mostly I warm my toes by the fire and read."

"Now, John, you rarely get a moment - "

Her husband interrupted. "Look at this. A monstrosity blows in and I waste God knows how many days holdin' Sally Steele's hand at her death bed for the umpteenth time. How many times has that woman almost breathed her last? What ailment does she *not* swear she's got?" He put fists on his hips. His suit jacket waved in the breeze behind him like a cape. The Reverend John turned to his wife and joked: "Ol' Sally's probably just sweet on me. Couple o' hundred years old but still got her eyesight."

He winked at his wife, who shook her red head slowly and defended the older woman. "She *is* lonely, but not enough to make her lie 'bout being sick."

"Hogwash. I'm gonna make up some disease - somethin' with fits and twitchin' - then she'll have it for sure, and I..."

"You certainly will *not*."

"And I will *not* pray against it."

"Have mercy. She's sufferin'."

The Reverend John scoffed, "Sufferin' where no earthbound doctor can help her. When we finally do put her under a tombstone it'll hafta read: 'Died of Surprise.' Too bad her husband passed on in . . . in . . . what war

was it took him? Not the last one. She's been a widow longer'n I been alive."

"Utah War. Before the States' War."

"Right. Right. Damned Mormons."

"The war didn't get him, dear. A bear slapped his scalp off."

"That's what I said, woman - he's been long dead." He winked at the cousin, "But if he weren't, he'd be sure to fix what's ailin' Sally."

The one-eyed cousin laughed.

"You watch your mouth. Talkin' so low. And on the Lord's Day, too."

"Don't worry, missus." He raised his hands toward heaven, "God knows it's true. The Lord hath moved me to tell that woman she's a tough old boot and will outlive us all. I'll tell her that much straight out. Then I'll run. And she'll rise up out of that bed and chase me. Just what she needs."

"Shameful."

He nodded in agreement, "She'd chase me with a hot fire poker, I imagine. And don't think I won't do it, missus. I am a servant of the Lord." Then he turned his attention to the camp and mumbled, "Well, what we gonna do

'bout this travelin' tool for all types o' temptation?"

"Bring 'em the Word, dear. It's what you do."

With that, the Reverend John marched into camp, hollering from deep in his belly, "Come one, come all."

The fiddler played, and the red-head sang, "*Wash me in the blood of the Lamb, and I shall be whiter than snow.*"

Women hung laundry on lines tied between trees, but stopped to listen. Men chopped wood and children cared for those smaller - but all turned toward the music and the spectacle that was the Reverend John. He shook tent poles as he travelled down the rows, bellowing, "It's the Lord's Day! Church starts as soon as you grab a stump and lend an ear." He gave two boys a few coins and pressed them into service, "Run, tell ever'body. Worship Service dead center right now." The boys ran in opposite directions to reach the ends of the camp and herd folks together. "Bring your babies. Carry the sick. Run, skip or crawl. Get outta that tent and worship. It's come-to-Jesus time. God's got a message and you can't hide. He'll find you out like He done Jonah."

Walt saw the stirring of the camp and asked Vivian if she wanted to go, but it wasn't until the Reverend John shook tent poles in their row and banged a spoon on the

back end of a stew pot that she decided church was not to be missed today. The couple stood off to the side of center where most of the people gathered - coming out of their tents, happily, hesitatingly or angrily, and from behind trees by the creek. They congregated where the Reverend John found a crate to overturn and stand. Just as he began to speak, two men picked up the tongue of a wagon and pulled it like oxen through the crowd. They positioned it behind the crate for the man of God to stand taller. He heartily shook their hands, climbed onto the open bed of the wagon and began again, confident it would be a day for the record books.

Part II

“There is a charm about
the forbidden
that makes it unspeakably
desirable.”

Mark Twain

“A pure hand
needs no glove
to cover it.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Chapter 11 - Suffering

From atop the wagon the Reverend John's sermon started strong. "I'm not gonna tell ya'll not to drink and gamble and carouse. I 'spect you already know the evils of that." The preacher had a message people had been dying for. Words thundered from his belly, "Why is there suffering? If there is a good God lookin' after us all, why do we suffer?" Scanning the crowd, he saw them hunger. That question had been asked for centuries but not yet been properly answered, for the question itself seemed sinful. He had their attention, and spoke with a passionate rhythm.

"Folk used to think answers got lost with the ancient ones. Go far back enough and find God's wisdom, said they, but the further ahead we get, tick tock, the more confused we got. But that kind of thinkin' has fell out of fashion. These days, folk tend to think answers are in the future. That's why the aged are laughed at when they make good sense - which should be proof that young people certainly are confused."

Many in the crowd laughed and nodded, especially the very old.

The Reverend John's voice rose high, falling with the

fire and cadence of Billy Sunday. "To be sure, we got advancements. We got progress. We got a dirty word called 'consolidated.' We got machines. Machines doin' what your back used to do just fine - and got paid for taboot! Someday we'll just push buttons to do our walkin' an' talkin' an' cookin' an' washin' an' even our thinkin' for us. I 'spect comfort may kill us. I hope so, 'cause if not, we might bow down and call some machine 'master'."

Exhilarated whoops rose from the assembly.

The Reverend John was just warming up. "But don't dig your stubborn heels in like Ned Ludd whenever change comes."

The crowd was silent while the Reverend John took a breath, until one man yelled, "Ludd was right!"

"I know Ludd was right," he agreed. "But the army showed up an' folk got arrested when they all should'a been home tendin' their families. Now, I'm not a lily-livered man - give me a cause an' a stick o' dynamite an' I'm there." He raised his fist, "I'm all for fightin' when fightin' is called for, but we have got to pick our battles! Progress ain't gonna be stopped. We *will* lose our jobs now an' then. We *are* gonna get sick and kicked in the teeth more often than not. We *are* gonna bury our loved

ones from war and God knows what all else. We know it's comin'."

The body of people nodded and knew.

The Reverend John saw some shifting in their seats, so he brought them back to his point. "Why is there suffering? I know some of you been sheddin' so many tears you make the ocean envious. I'll tell you. It ain't 'cause o' Adam an' Eve. God coulda stopped 'em from eatin' that fruit if he wanted to. And we can't blame our sin and sufferin' on the devil either."

There was much stirring and squirming, but the Reverend John shook, enraptured. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against rulers of darkness an' spiritual wickedness, but it was God that gave evil this territory to play with in the first place!"

Indignant tones raced through the crowd in angry whispers. Finally, a woman cried, "What kind of preacher are you?"

The Reverend John raised his voice above the murmurs. "The kind that don't think God is like a white dog and the devil like a black dog - an' they both get to scrappin' and sometimes the black dog wins and sometimes the white dog wins. If that's the way it is, then sometimes God loses!"

The people gasped and hushed.

"But I don't serve a God who loses!" He paused, looking over the crowd. Those who had stood, sat back down. The pleasant, hungering expressions had turned to scowls, but he still held their attention

"My God wins all the time." He raised his Bible in the air so people could be sure he wasn't talking about a strange god - one from the east, or from the natives, or worse: talking about mankind. The Reverend John grew heated - his voice filled with passion. "Yes, we got trials, 'cause hell's serpent tempted Eve who thought she was doing the right thing, but she was beguiled. Yes, it was she who tempted Adam but he knew exactly what he was doin' all the while. And all three of 'em got cursed by a Holy God who does not just sit on his throne hopin' and wishin' everything works out His way. That is not his style."

Vivian enjoyed watching such enthusiasm. The preacher was musical. He awed the crowd, controlled them, riled and rattled them. He had an admirable power.

"You know the devil still uses the same lie? It's a dandy - a real cracker jack lie. He says you don't have to do what God says. Disobey and *be like* God, says he. Don't

worry, you won't go to hell. He's still tellin' that same lie to you and to me 'cause it works so well."

Affirmative applause and hoots rose from the crowd.

"But we must remember who let the devil wander in the garden. God could make him disappear just by thinkin' a thought, but He won't, even though He can. I would! But next time I create a universe I guess I'll do things my way." The people laughed. "In fact, you'll hear folk saying six days ain't long enough to create a universe. I say six days is a lot of dillydallying for somebody with all-power. Why take so long?" The flock clapped and smiled. "God does what He wants. But back to my point: when He created ever'thing, didn't He say it was good?" The crowd nodded. "So why wasn't the devil good?"

It was so quiet then that the Reverend John thought he could hear all hearts pound and all teeth clench, grind and gnash - a suspenseful beat to accompany him as he continued boldly. "I'll tell ya. A good creator makes images like any artist. But a good piece of art is never all that the artist is. So, yes, creation is good and perfect, but still, we're less than the artist. We're just an image. A vapor! As we reproduce we get further and further from Him. You and I are copies of copies. Some of you may have

seen mimeograph machines, right? Ya got to use the original to get a good copy or pretty soon you got a sorry, smeary mess. But the devil's got more power than ever before compared to us 'cause he's the same devil God made in the beginning! He hasn't changed. He's perfect for his purpose, which is evil.

An angry man pushed his way through the throng bellowing, "We're getting better and better! We got geniuses like never before! We can even fly cross the Atlantic now."

"Yes, we got geniuses. But they're throwbacks to an earlier time, stickin' out like sore thumbs. They remind us of what we used to be." The Reverend John rallied back to his topic, "Don't think there ain't a good purpose for even the devil's wicked deeds. When the purpose is good, the bad action ain't bad - like askin' a doctor to stick a knife in your gut, or the fire brigade to bust down your door and drag your children outside."

Many in the multitude scratched their heads or frowned outright.

"God ain't bad for makin' a devil and lettin' him run amok on a divine leash. It's comfortin' to know that once children get on the other side of childhood, they will

understand more. And when we get on the other side of adulthood, we will understand it all."

The rafters would have rattled if the sermon weren't out of doors.

"In that way, I 'spect, the answers are in the future. After we pass to the other side - we end where we began. But what about the middle? What about the suffering?"

Vivian marveled at the fickle human nature. People both loved and hated the sermon at the same time. She recalled a time when her parents took her to a revival meeting years before. A young woman started jumping up and down, speaking tongues in a frenzy. Vivian's mother explained in a whisper: "Holy Rollers." The girl then fell to the floor in fits. As she rolled around, her skirt crept high over her waist. People went to help her, but that preacher hollered, "Leave her be. Let her glory show!" Vivian's father began to laugh and couldn't stop - and that was the end of their church-going for many years.

The Reverend John lowered his tone from a feverish pitch to one of contemplation. "Tell me, why do we say 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away' but then when somethin' bad happens we forget that and ask 'Where was God?' Do people lose faith at that point? I say they

didn't have much to begin with. It's easy to believe when times are good. Lovin' your friends ain't hard at all. But belief that ain't just speculation is belief that holds up under a beatin'. Count it all joy!"

The crowd applauded.

"Remember, it was God who hardened Pharaoh's heart, and then sent the plagues on him *because* of his hard heart. Wishin' it were different don't make it so."

The people nodded, mumbling affirmations and tsked at the dilemma.

"The Good Book says we should say 'If the Lord wills' we will live or do this or that. We're not to pat our own backs for success and we're not to point blame for our troubles. It's all good and all planned. Perfect! Count it all joy!"

Some of the people walked away, confident that they moved on their own power.

A fervent roar came from the preachers throat, emphasizing syllables poetically for effect. "If you wanna run me outta here on a rail, then that's what God has for me today - but first you got to get His permission! Jesus told Simon Peter that the devil asked permission - wantin' to sift the disciples like wheat. Think on that a bit -

the evil one asked permission."

Many in the crowd cheered.

"The good news is: the devil *needs* permission to do his messin'. The bad news is: sometimes God gives it to him. So who's in control?"

A few voices rang out, answering, "God."

"Couldn't hear ya. Who's in control?"

Many called out loudly, "God!"

Thrusting his Bible toward Heaven the Reverend John spoke with quaking thunder, exciting those who remained. "It's given unto the saints to believe and also to suffer for His sake. Given like a gift! From this we learn compassion. And where would we be without that? We'd be a miserable cold lot. Hearts are in the hand of God. He turns them this way and that, like rivers, wherever He wants."

He tucked his Bible under his arm and cupped his hands together to weave a motion like a river. "What we will do is already done. Even those wishin' harm are in His hand - and after that He then moves the rest of us to slap 'em down hard or string 'em up high. We must not be afraid of those that kill the body, and after that have nothing else they can do. Instead, fear the One who after He hath

killed hath power to cast into hell!"

The crowd cheered loudly while some feverishly flipped through their Bible pages to find the references he quoted. The Reverend John continued shouting out verses excitedly, which roused the people. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We are called upon to help one another, not to hurt and rob each other! The haughty and naughty can not enter heaven."

A woman from the back yelled, "The bank took everything."

"A heartless bunch, yes."

The crowd chuckled.

"Most of 'em, but not all. You probably seen them library's Andrew Carnegie built. He said somethin' interesting once. First get all the education you can, and then make all the money you can, and then spend your time giving it away. He said when men die as rich as all that they die disgraced! The reason God gives wealth is to share with others. Carnegie understood that."

The man of God shrugged his shoulders toward heaven. "But how do the rest of the rich live with themselves? It don't matter. Forgive 'em, yes, but remember where everything you have comes from. Everything you have -

including your want. Everything from God. A gift."

He shook his Bible at them. "So, where does suffering come from? God said He's the one who causes deafness and blindness. Told Moses right there at the burning bush. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, but not evil? Job didn't think so. God makes light and peace. He creates darkness and evil. That's why there is suffering! And that's why there is charity."

Heated, the congregation either cheered or threw hats to the ground in frustration. Undaunted by a few hecklers who picked up stones, the Reverend John continued. "Fret not, fear not! In all things give thanks. Perilous times shall come. Count it all joy! The wicked spring as the grass and will sure as shootin' flourish, but they will be destroyed forever. *Will* be, just wait and see. Endure to the end! Count it all joy!"

Speaking from his height in the camp the preacher seemed as a giant, shouting at the top of his power with a stomping rhythm. "Life ain't supposed to get rosy if the end draws near. Life may get better in the future, if 'better' means comfortable. But if 'better' means more people are upright, I think we seen those days clean gone to memory. Times have to get worse and worse, so saith the

Lord. So don't let it surprise you. When the good Lord returns, He comes for us with his eyes ablaze, smiting nations with a wrathful sword. He comes to judge and to wage war. Why do that if ever'body is behavin'? But He won't come back till after the evil one tricks folk to follow him. Choose this day whom you will serve! Amen."

Vivian noted that the preacher covered near the whole Bible from the beginning to the end. By the time the Amens echoed through the camp, those still remaining had risen to their feet, applauding. They whistled and whooped while moving forward, some with tears in their eyes, to shake the Reverend John's hand.

Walt was one of the first.

Vivian enjoyed the preacher and his ways, but it all soured for her as Walt bolted from her side. She kicked at him as he hurried through the unsettled crowd. They were separated. Enraged, she slipped back to her tent, fists clenched, fidgeting with fury - unsatisfied. It brought her a bit of comfort to toss Walt's shaving kit into the creek.

Stepping down from his platform, the preacher prayed with the people and ministered to those who had need. "Ask God for nothin' and you're likely to get it."

The missus sang, "*Have thine own way, Lord, Thou art the Potter; I am the clay.*" She held her husband's hat to receive campers' tithes and their offerings, if they so inclined. Not many had anything to give. After the gathering quieted, she meandered among the people to pay her own tithe and offering. She slipped money into the hands of those who looked particularly ill or troubled - wherever the spirit led - and insisted the Lord would provide.

Jule was in high spirits, feeling blessed. He had wagered the fine points of the sermon with a few other men. First: how long it would last; second, if the preacher's veins would bulge at some point; and third, how many times the word "sin" would be uttered before final prayers. Flush with winnings, Jule praised Jesus and invited the Reverend home for supper.

Chapter 12 - A New Deal

Since the weather cooperated, many from the camp wanted to be baptized. While Jennie organized a few friends to help her prepare a fine supper for the Reverend John and his people, Walt and many others sat quietly within earshot by the river. Some simply wanted to hear what else the preacher had to say, but others itched to argue. They hoped to trap him in a blunder - with God's help. Vivian had wandered to the riverside to watch the baptisms. She stayed out of Walt's eye line.

The Reverend John gave a child two bits to watch his boots and added a bit of advice, "Stompin' on snakes is good for the soul." He hung his jacket on a branch and rolled up his sleeves before wading into waste deep water where the current wasn't very strong. His missus went home to collect dry clothes for her husband to wear after the service. People waited anxiously for a blessing.

The Fox showed up limping and bruised, leaning on his nurse. The Reverend John sighed deeply when he saw the tall man. He mumbled, "Now I have seen it all."

Word spread about Fox's grievous sins and retribution. Many suspected that he came to the river merely to appear

newly converted so he could continue living in the little town. His nurse, charged with helping him eat and dress due to his broken hands, walked him to the water's edge. He was a bit clumsy due to the bathtub gin used medicinally - from his nurse's own supply. Fox waited his turn. A few children came to kick him and chuck rocks, on instructions from their parents, but they could not get him riled. Fox was a patient man.

The Reverend John dunked all who came seeking burial and rebirth. Between those going in dirty and coming out clean, he spoke on a variety of topics ranging from the sodomites to the communists, and his grandfather who was most certainly shanghai'd. When Roosevelt's New Deal was mentioned, the Reverend became so agitated that the sputtering reborn nearly didn't make it back up for air.

"I'm a man of caution. I wear not only a good strong belt, but suspenders as well - and I say FDR's New Deal doesn't smell right. They're nationalizing everything to fix the very problem they made sure as shootin' would happen in the first place. Raisin' wages and taxes, forcin' prices down so mom-and-pop shops fail. It's a power grab - nothin' more."

The Reverend John seemed to lose concentration on the

baptismal service, as people went down roughly and came up awkward and gasping. He rushed through the words accompanying each baptism, to the point that his wife and even his one-eyed cousin often filled in gaps with the correct words. A heated topic always got the preacher worked up into a full head of steam.

"Won't be nothin' to pass from sire to son. Personal property and fair profit's disappearin' and they don't care who starves in the meantime. Farmers being paid *not* to grow crops. Pourin' milk in the streets. Killin' livestock by the millions. Plowin' under acres and acres of crops. They got a plan alright, but they ain't aimin' for recovery - they're goin' straight for social reform. They mean to break us - make us needy. It ain't right."

A few people on the riverbanks reminded him to count it all joy.

The Reverend John was livid. He nearly cursed and slipped in the mud as he shoved a blessed woman to shore, but soon regained his composure - nearing exhaustion. His missus demanded that the subject be changed before somebody drowned.

Jule tried to offer a new topic, which was practically akin to the same line of thought, causing the situation to

worsen. He asked whether the Reverend John had dabbled in the stock market like everyone else.

"No, I did not, young man. It's gambling - and look what it's done. Men can't provide for their families now because of that wickedness. Caution! Take care! Watch your back. Still, God uses wickedness to show off the good. But punishment will come."

Jule moaned over a lost opportunity. He wished he'd had time to make a bet before asking his question. He knew to expect an answer involving the words 'gambling' and 'wickedness' uttered in the same breath.

"Permanent prosperity. Permanent! That's what they promised. Who ever heard of such a thing? Just a shameful house built on shifting sand. Mercy! Self-delusion. Mass illusion. Wealth without work? Abomination. Speculation. We crashed smack dab into humiliation and hunger. Free fall. Foreclosure. Fears and tears. Pride and suicide." The Reverend John's tirade of indignation stopped when he became pensive.

"Hoover's gotten a bad reputation lately. Seems everybody voted for him in twenty-eight and then everybody voted against him in thirty-two. We tend to forget why we liked him in the first place. How many of you remember

what he did in the Great War?"

Many hung their heads and were ashamed for turning their backs on the great man.

"Fed nine million Belgians every day throughout that war as if the Germans weren't there." The Reverend dunked one old man so roughly that he came back up apologizing for voting against Hoover.

"Just a private citizen - a businessman. Collecting money and using his own funds to pay for all that food. No nation bothered to do it. Just a man. Wasn't even a politician! People begged him to run for office in 1920, but he wouldn't. Just a businessman. Now FDR wants the government to do the same thing Hoover did as a private citizen, but it won't be the same thing. We must not let him! Hooverizing is something people do willingly. But forced charity can not work. And people on the receiving end will tend to think of it as their due, rather than a kindness. FDR wants to force us to save money, too - let him hold it and spend it how he sees fit and then pay it back to us when we get old. I would trust Hoover with my money! You remember, he refused his paycheck in the White House, because he was already rich. He worked himself up from nothin'. Roosevelt ain't that way."

A man waved away the preacher's words with his hat and yelled, "FDR gave me steady work."

"Because once congress finally got their guy in office they passed laws that Hoover already proposed. Hoover said it's the responsibility of the rich to help those in need. He lived it! And now with one man out of four being out of work - there's three *with* work! Those three should be helpin' the one. And if the one starts to take advantage, the three will notice and give him a swift kick in the pants. But passin' money through the government to come back at us will be wasteful - and the fella getting' it won't be watched to make sure he don't get comfortable holdin' his hand out. Hoover didn't figure it's the government's job to do what you and I had ought. And we turned our backs on him."

The Reverend John had worked himself into a foul mood by the time he saw Fox step into the water. He lowered his voice from a roar to a growl. "I hope you're here to repent."

The fox replied timidly. "Yes, sir."

Murmuring began in the crowd as the story was explained to those few who hadn't yet heard. He took hold of the Fox's snout and braced the back of his head. "I

baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." He was taken backward until the cold water rolled over him from all sides, sealing him beneath. The Fox could not hold onto the preacher's arms to steady himself like others had done. His arms and legs flailed about. He splashed, thrashed and struggled.

The Reverend John held him down and smiled at the crowd. "We wanna make sure it takes."

They laughed, and some covered their faces.

"Should I let him up?"

The crowd shouted their vote: far from unanimous.

Rising, Fox used his arms to wipe the water from his eyes. He slipped and stumbled to shore, surrounded by whispers, jeers and threats. Vivian breathlessly admired the preacher.

The Reverend John warned, "The world can go to hell in a hand basket before we tolerate that, Fox. Don't you make us wish the family finished what they started last night."

A woman defended, "If they'd have killed him last night he wouldn't have time to repent today."

"The good Lord knows how much time that feller's got, and if," the preacher emphasized, "if, he's really sorry. Forgiving is one thing. Trust is somethin' else. Only God

forgives and clean forgets." He jabbed a finger harshly toward the Fox. "But we won't forget you!"

The man nodded and limped home. The consensus in the gathering was that such offenders should be branded just in case they skip town trying to infect the unsuspecting elsewhere. If he'd have actually had time to violate the children, he'd have been strung up and left for the birds and dogs to pick apart - and buried later, begrudgingly.

Folk let it roll round in their minds, and the more they thought on it the less they felt right to give Fox a pass. It was like he was actually given credit for his failure - as if an attempted wrong is less wrong than an accomplished one.

As the Reverend John shivered into a nearby tent to change clothes for supper, several men met in knotted clusters to whisper the matter of the Fox. Campers felt that surely the townsmen were having the same conversation. On the other hand, when those men had the chance - when their coals burned red hot in the moment - they still didn't carry through.

Some in the group reminded, "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord."

Others felt that the verse referred only to a single

instance, not an on-going threat. One man said, "This ain't vengeance. It's prevention. Self-defense. Me and mine are within range of him. He's just bidin' his time till we let our guard down. And he ain't glued to this town. We got to be vigil."

A few men wanted nothing to do with it while others volunteered. Finally, the negative nellies were sent on their way, as well as the indecisive "will I nill I" types, leaving the real men to draw lots from a hat. All kinds are necessary to balance out a society. The kind who stayed were comfortable with necessary evil.

Walt was one of the men who left. He wanted Fox dead as much as the others, but he couldn't risk going to jail. Who would take care of Vivian?

A solemn mood overtook the willful huddle while a hat was passed. The chosen one would draw the sole chit of paper bearing an "X" and the rest would choose blanks. None would know who got the job and no one would ask. Men held the small paper in their fist until the last man put his hat on his head. They turned and walked away from each other in an expanding circle. One man then saw that he held the honor of safeguarding the community. He had three days. If Fox was not dead by then, the group would meet

again, no questions asked. Someone else would have a chance - a more capable or courageous citizen.

Vivian wondered at the whispers and learned from the few words she caught that they meant to deal with the tall, thin man in a permanent fashion - for the good of all. She tried to discern from their faces which man was given the task - but could not. She trembled with curiosity.

Jennie put supper on the table while Rena told her the buzz of who all got baptized. She would fill in the rest of the details later, as Jennie wanted to pay attention to her guests. Uninvited guests pressed from the outside in, to the point that Jule worried the tent would collapse. He pointed where people could sit inside his tent, and where they should sit outside, with instructions to not touch or otherwise fiddle with his tent and its poles, stakes or ropes.

Being a close friend, Walt was given preferential seating inside the tent. He hadn't even gone home to check on his wife's whereabouts - to see if she was alright. Vivian stewed about this as she watched the play of shadows from outside as the scene was projected against the tent walls. One thing for sure, she felt: she and the preacher were kindred spirits.

Finally, as the sun slipped toward the western horizon and colored the sky's low clouds brilliantly, temperatures dropped as well. The Reverend John and his missus heartily thanked their hosts, and reminded the crowd that their door was always open. Full of mincemeat pie, cider and Jennie's fricassee, they ambled through the field. The couple held hands as they returned to town, followed quietly by the weary one-eyed cousin. The man of God visited Sally Steele again - who had not yet died of anything vile.

Walt slept better than he had in years. Vivian did not set the rooster near the bed for her husband to find upon waking. Her hesitation was not for charity-sake. She simply saved the rooster for another day. Again, Vivian slept in her chair and imagined what it'd be like to have married the fiery Reverend John.

Chapter 13 - Skunks

After the Lord's Day, Rena saw her first opportunity to organize women into a gathering to trade pieces of cloth for quilting. Vivian was invited, and did need new pieces, but hated to venture out during the day, especially to mingle with chatty women. After collecting a few squares and parcels she could part with, she marched down the camp rows, confident she would secure the choicest scraps - then be home within a half hour.

As Vivian neared the largest tent she stopped to eavesdrop on conversations inside. One woman whispered to another that her neighbor's young son actually thought his name was "Little Shit" and had introduced himself as such. Others spoke of electric ice boxes and how only so much could be asked of a girdle.

Rena dutifully reported that Mr. Fox hung himself from the rafters in his living room after his nurse stepped out for tobacco. "Guilt will do that." But why destroy several rooms in his home beforehand? "People are funny." Quite a tussle with his conscience they supposed. A question seemed to occur to all the women at once: how did he manage to hang himself with broken hands? That brought a

considerable amount of discomfort and silence, until Rena sighed: "Where there's a will, there's a way." His funeral would probably not be well attended, but would be respectful, regardless of what everyone thought of him. The wages of sin is death - now paid.

Immediately upon entering the tent, Vivian felt the tension. Women had been assembled and were waiting. The chatter ended. Elva, the plump woman with honey hair worn high, crossed the room with a calculated welcome. She provided a wicker chair in the middle of the room. Vivian's recollection of quilt parties was that they were never so focused. So quiet. Each woman held cloth like a prop. Vivian felt ambushed and darted an accusing eye at Rena, who simply grinned from ear to ear with her poisonous tongue licking her lips. Other women smiled as well, but some sat stiffly with arms crossed, glaring in Vivian's direction. A few simply looked down, or turned their faces to the side, with eyes shut. Confusion fell over the faces of teenage girls. They knew something was about to happen, but were not sure what. They were the only ones not eager for, or resigned to, the discomfort.

Despite its innocent appearance, Vivian knew the chair was a baited trap. She alone would spring the very device

that would break her - if she wasn't careful. These ladies couldn't be happy until the sudden snap startled and thrilled all. They would watch till Vivian's twitching slowed and stopped, and then they'd look upon their victim with disgusted satisfaction. The smell of cheese hung in the air.

Vivian steadied herself. There could only be one reason for such a trap, but she would not talk about her children. Approaching the chair, she sat and announced: "I can't stay long."

Elva smiled, "None of us are here forever, dear."

The reference to death. Vivian nodded, and knew she needed to speak or be spoken to. Quickly, she scanned the room for a diversion. In less than a polite moment, she took control of the room. "How you gettin' by, Homer?"

Homer was Elva's hopeless brother-in-law, unable to work. He delighted in being the only man in the room. He smiled, showing off his three remaining teeth which had turned sideways as they traveled loosely along his gums. Propped in the corner on a bed, Homer's eyes brightened, "Thanky fer askin', missy. I bin better." Homer sported a leg brace. The leg it embraced withered for lack of use. The bone slowly turned soft, trying to disappear with time.

Doctors wanted to take it off him, but Homer refused to let them amputate. "I help with woman's work now - that's all I is good fer."

Homer had told a variety of tales over the years to explain the cause of his condition. Each had a bit of truth woven into the tale. "I'm just a broke up ol' rodeo wonder what rode Midnight but nobody else lived to tell. That tornado bucked all his witnesses to death, but I escaped with only a wrinkled spine." Another version of the story was that he was beaten senseless while dealing rotgut. Caught running a still, he thought it funny to insult the wives of the revenuers by telling the officers that he'd fathered most of the children in their homes. By Homer's say-so, the incident also included Indian ceremonies gone wrong, submarine attacks in the Great War, circus elephants when he worked the Carnies, and finally, a prison riot - which he led. Elva said he fell out of the barber's chair when given the gas to take a tooth gone bad.

Vivian commented on his woman's work: "Oh, now, Homer, I see you out choppin' wood and anchorin' tent points when we move down the road. Sam's team o' mules don't listen to no one but you."

Homer laughed and nodded, "If that ain't true, yes."

He felt Elva hovering over him with disapproval, but continued his pleasant exchange with Vivian. "You should drop by us more, missy, since my poor brother's wife has taken to talkin' 'bout nothin' but you all the day long."

"Homer! Enough." Elva turned and laughed uncomfortably. She didn't need to explain him, but offered anyway: "He takes to drink."

"I do at that. But I also smell skunk when skunk's prowling." Homer leaned around Elva, who had blocked his view so she could mouth unrepeatables which he ignored. Getting a brief glimpse of Vivian from beyond Elva's borders, he warned, "You watch yerself, missy. They's skunk about." He yelped in pain for what Elva did to him, which no one saw but God. Homer continued to cackle, then shouted out, "A whole derned flock o' mean fanged skunk!"

Politeness was a weapon Vivian used to maintain control until she could exit. She quickly targeted another distraction while Homer chuckled himself quiet. "Clara, how was your trip to Denver?"

Clara smiled sweetly and began her story, which several of the other women had already heard. Vivian moved her chair closer to Clara, who had been one of the women staring down at her shoes when Vivian entered the trap.

Most of the women patiently listened to Clara recount her adventures in Denver, but the corners of the tent had erupted in a flurry of brief whispers. Vivian caught a few of those hushed words. The one circulating most: shame.

Clara's grandson, Jacky, was down with rickets. His sisters, a few years older, felt so sorry for him during his illness that they postponed their attempts to kill him. Once they had convinced him to jump out of a barn loft onto a heap of hay. They said it would be soft like landing on a pillow, but from his angle above he could not see the shallow depth covering a wagon. Another time, the girls were treading water in the pond and told him he could just walk out - it wasn't deep. He took a few cautious steps forward and plunged into the wet darkness. He learned how to swim quick. Gasping for air, he hardly heard the laughter of the sisters. But in Denver they saw he was so sickly and weak with rickets that even during recovery he could barely pull his little wagon before collapsing. His sisters mercifully tended him - for they needed their little Jacky well. He had a gift for filling their days with amusement.

Clara related that they stayed in a house where spooks pulled the girls' hair and shook the beds. A few women

clasped their ears and said, "Speak of the devil and he will appear." This sparked a debate on protection and prayer, which gave Vivian time to trade cloth with a few women nearby - and then be fit to leave. While she strategized toward the door, it had been decided that God never neglects to answer prayer - He simply gives a 'yes,' 'no' or a 'later' - never a 'maybe' - and those two out of three possible 'yesses' often come with an 'if' clause.

The women began to relate personal testimony on the subject as Vivian nearly escaped, inching her way to the door. Suddenly, a commotion began. Clara stood and pointed a long slender arm with an accusing finger at Homer. "That rattlesnake is violatin' Audrey!"

Homer roared with laughter. Tobacco juice dripped from the corner of his mouth - which he didn't bother to wipe away. His fly gaped open wide as he repeatedly thrust his loins into the air toward the young girl. "I jus' can't git comfy 'cause my poor ol' crippled leg's botherin' me bad." He then feigned notice of his open fly, "Oh, my! 'scuse me ladies." He laughed so hard that half the words thundered out of his throat, and the rest squeaked - barely audible.

A winsome Alleghany girl, Audrey sat perfectly still

with her face flushed - mortified. She fixed her eyes straight ahead and seemed a trembling statue, except for her fingers which busily worried a ribbon on her bodice. Her attire was clean but a bit dingy, having seen better days. Fortunes diminished slowly for some, and quickly for others. Audrey's parents burned her piano to keep warm one frosty night a year before, but left her the dignity of her best dress. Even though she was full-grown, she only thought it odd to see Homer bouncing a bit on his bed and grinning at her with his three pointed teeth. But when she saw that his fly was open, her jaw dropped, which made Homer try to stifle a belly laugh, and that brought his accusers.

Elva flustered and angrily apologized, saying, "He was reared in a devil swamp, always been no count - jus'a rump wart, seedy, morally weak recipe for grief."

Rena turned to the others and apologized for Elva, "Oh, do pardon her French, ladies."

Elva swung at Homer with a long handled ladle, "There's a noose waitin' fer ya someday, Homer. That feller Fox ain't even cold yet and you're botherin' poor Audrey."

With a few thrusts of an unkept fly Homer had gone

from an ornery slaphappy rascal to an enemy of all that is decent. He laughed through the barrage of insults and threats, and only concerned himself with the quiet promise from the girl's mother: "Her father'll knock you into next Tuesday, Homer. He'll get you good."

Homer pouted - no longer cocky. He turned his face to the tent, which rolled like waves in the wind. He sullenly hoped his crippled status would spare him the wrath of an indignant father bent on sending him into next Tuesday. Homer had been unconscious before, but had usually come to himself the same day. One time he was promised Tuesday, but actually woke on a Wednesday. He remembered his people back in what Elva called the devil swamp - an accurate depiction. So many had tried to 'get him good,' but he wouldn't learn, and stayed bad. Bribes from his mother, beatings by his father, and lectures from the preacher were all just so tiresome.

Homer hadn't offered to let Audrey feel his jelly leg. Most women refused such an offer, and Homer would holler, "Ain't like you'd be deflowered none." Vivian watched how Homer curled up, beaten by a mere threat of retaliation. Despite his pouting and his indecent advances, Vivian had a soft spot for Homer the way she found for the Reverend

John. But as far as kindred spirits go, when push came to shove she judged by motivation. Homer had to take a back seat to the preacher, since one man tried to make Audrey blush but the other had regard for her soul. Also, the preacher was full of spitfire, but Homer was simply annoying.

The curvature of his back on a rectangular bed, where he was kept by his sister-in-law, reminded Vivian of the day she learned life could be more than ordinary. A glorious realization. On that day, while still a schoolgirl, Vivian witnessed a failed science demonstration. After lunch, she stood at the door for girls and watched her teacher emerge from the other door. He sent boys out to catch a field mouse. Then he rang the bell and the girls took their place inside. Remembering this, Vivian could still smell the chalk.

The boys returned, carefully carrying a mouse bundled inside a tweed cap. The schoolmaster held the creature up by its tail. They gathered round a glass tank covered with wire mesh - and told to watch. Over the tank, this tiny mouse dangled, unable to decide if silence or frantic squealing fit the situation. Finally, it chose silence while being lowered next to the sleepy snake. Once it felt

the loose grass and twigs strewn beneath, it quickly scurried to the opposite corner from where the snake was curled - and tried to climb the glass.

Everyone expected the snake to devour the little creature. Slowly the predator turned, darting its tongue toward the mouse, who had turned from the glass to face its enemy. Lacking choices, the mouse suddenly leapt high into the high air and landed behind the snake's head. With due desperation he then bit all the way down the long body to the other side of the tank - and quite nervously waited. If mice could pray - the odds were no longer favorable, since 'later' would not do. Fifty-fifty on a yes or no, but cunning might better those odds.

The wounded snake turned to pursue, but the little mouse leapt again, and chomped its way to the other corner. Eventually, the snake was dead, and the boys were sent out to find another snake for science's sake. The boys only half-heartedly searched. Finally, the teacher sent the girls out to broaden the search. That brought urgency to the boys' endeavors. Soon, a boy held a writhing snake twisting itself round a forked branch. Nothing could cheer the boys - they felt the mouse should be let go. Certainly there was no more room in it's little stomach to kill more

snakes. The girls were sour also, as they picked prickly burrs out of their stockings. All knew that a terrible wrong was being done to one particular mouse, now named Victor.

As Vivian sat in Rena and Elva's trap, she decided that poor Audrey was Homer's mouse - who would have the last laugh when her father came home - and likewise, Homer was Elva's mouse. Vivian felt sure Elva would win battles between her and Homer. That day in school had always given Vivian hope. If a mouse could kill a snake - anything was possible.

The commotion continued in the tent from those who cursed Homer, prayed for or against him, and those who told Elva, "Give him the boot, brother-in-law or no."

Elva answered, "He's not really family anyway - are ya, Homer?" She put a foot into his back and shoved him hard. He rocked back and forth until the bed stopped swaying, but he didn't respond. Elva explained that her husband's people came from the Territories, not from a southern stink swamp like old Homer. "They met in timbered country, cuttin' logs up Minnesota way, and became brothers of sorts." Rolling her eyes, Elva explained, "Homer here won the right in a card game 'cause he don't have family -

sez he. They probably ran him off." She added, "And those weren't no regular card games neither. See, the ground freezes hard ever' winter up north an' stays that way well to spring. So, the town took to storin' their dead in a big old shed until the thaw. My Sam and Homer and those other drunken loggers would go play poker with the departed in their makeshift mortuary."

The gasping ensued, and even Vivian was a bit taken back by the tale. Elva covered her face and moaned, "They propped up them bodies and posed 'em. Put cards in their hands. Can ya imagine? Men, women and even children in there - expectin' to be buried with some semblance of dignity, but these sorry excuses for men were - "

"We was jus' havin' fun, Elva." Homer had rolled over to defend himself. "Nobody complained none." He grinned widely, "And they had the best damned poker faces ya ever did see."

Elva began hitting Homer with whatever she could find. A pillow, a pot, a bonnet and a book. Homer laughed as if being tickled. He added, "I swear some of 'em were cheatin'."

Many women turned away to stifle their giggles. Vivian laughed and then wondered how long it'd been since

she laughed. She maneuvered herself toward the door - all the while offering niceties about a lady's hat or another's lace in order to make her exit more natural.

Rena was tying a rag rug when she saw Vivian trying to leave. She called out loud enough to stop all other chatter, "Vivian!"

With this, Rena commanded everyone's attention. There was a slight but fresh whiff of skunk in the air. "We all are so anxious to hear how you're coping, dear, after your misfortune." Rena's tone slipped into a slithery softness, "You must be so lonesome for your sweet babes. Do tell. How ever do you sleep?"

Cornered, Vivian could hear the train chugging along in the distance, as well as the hearts beating in the tent. In such a hush, she even heard the breath-holding. Everyone had heard the startling snap of the trap - but Vivian didn't twitch. She played her part in their little theatre.

"We all have our crosses to bear. I hope none of you are ever so burdened." She lifted her chin and skillfully pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve - dabbing her eye.

Amidst a few sighs of pity, Rena sought clarification, "Yes, many new mothers feel the weight of responsibility

with only one child - but three! My, my. You must have been plumb outta your mind."

Opal, a thorough lady, but a bit dotty, raised a dainty finger as if still in school. "Pardon me, but I believe Vivian meant the burden of their passing, not of their being." She turned to Vivian and whispered with trembling fingers over her heart, "I am so sorry for your loss."

A stern but frail and homely woman who had been stoking the stove said, "They passed? I never got word." The breath-holding began again as the stinging odor of skunk grew thick. "Did any of you get word of it? I, for one, sure would have attended the funerals."

"How," Rena added slowly, "did they pass?"

The skunk's scent was in full flower now. Vivian breathed it in and let it burn her lungs. She sipped tea and sampled slices of cheese on crackers spread across a lovely tray. To her calculation, most ladies regretted the ruse which called her out. She counted on their support. Looking Rena straight in the eye, Vivian whispered, "They passed peacefully."

Raising her handkerchief again to dab her eye, Vivian left quickly. There was a storm of murmurings in her wake

as she scurried through the camp rows to safety. She escaped before being pecked to death. The air was better there - just the stench of humanity. How silly, Vivian thought, that so recently she had tried to keep the burial a secret - as if no one would notice. People don't mind their own business the way they ought. Crumpling her new cloth squares in her fists she shoved them deep into her dress pockets. There, she toyed with the sugar spoon lifted from Elva's tea service. And she hated Rena.

Chapter 14 - A Body

An orange sun rose to meet crisp morning air. Vivian hurried to get breakfast on the humble board where Walt waited in his chair and strung his boot laces. The iron rooster doorstep stared at him coldly.

"Where'd this come from?"

"I found it", Vivian said as she put Walt's breakfast in front of the rooster. Then she hurried to the tent flap for a peek outside. Oddly, she darted back and forth to that spot all morning. She even woke early to go there.

Walt felt she might be expecting company, which was not like her at all. Nevertheless, he would not question her sudden interest in camp bustle. He dared not ask, since she'd quit her place in the sun if he appeared pleased with her newfound habit. Walt enjoyed thinking she might mingle with other people. No one should spend all day cooped up alone, despairing over fortune's whim. But that's what his wife preferred - to sit in the dark and be alone with her thoughts.

Vivian listened to children playing in the muddy rows. Four-foot-tall road agents focused on robbing a stagecoach at gunpoint. They pointed sticks and hollered 'bang bang,'

which caused the boy tugging a dog on a leash to clasp his chest, moan, and fall from the chair serving as his seat atop the coach. A posse of pint-sized vigilantes then appeared from behind rocks to cleanse the world of such villains - while the dog licked the hapless face of the slain driver. They tossed a rope over the lowest limb of a nearby tree to bring the highwaymen to Justice. Final words from the condemned didn't vary. With quivering chins and sniffles, they spoke apologies, of forgiveness - and of their mothers. None claimed innocence, mistaken identity, nor faulty procedure. None begged for leniency due to a troubled youth. None blamed peace-keepers for picking on them. Caught meant caught. To say anything else made them liars on top of being thieves. That changed the game and varied the outcome. Forgiveness alone lets people off scot-free. Justice shouldn't be an airy thing - it should be tethered to something solid.

But a liar is just low-down, using trickery like snake oil salesmen and politicians. Honor insists that your adversary isn't taken at a disadvantage. Like shooting someone in the back, or picking on the weak. Honor demands a fair and equal fight on level ground. And so, lying about being innocent when you're not won't do. The mighty

don't prove themselves that way. Winning dirty isn't winning. At least not in the long run.

Each honest robber justly felt the scratchy hemp on his tender young throat and heard the words, "May God have mercy on your soul." The boy placing the noose on those necks then jerked it upwards, startling the guilty. The boys then switched hats to play different parts. Some took to one role better than another.

A father emerged from his tent, rolling fried eggs and cheese inside a large tortilla, and taught the youngsters how to tie a proper necktie. He ate while giving instructions: "Adjust the length for each miscreant's weight and build. Too short brings a slow strangulation with twitching. Decent folk don't like watchin' that - but listening to it is worse." Between bites of breakfast, the man continued, "If the drop is too long the head yanks right off. Damned messy." He then placed a perfected snare on one of the boys, trying it out for size. Showing them how to slide the knot tight, he mumbled something about needing oil for a good glide, but soap would do. And don't forget to soak and stretch the rope so there's no give. "A sapling like you needs eight feet I think. Me, probably only five and a half." The boys were thrilled.

"Study your math and get it right," he warned with a snap of his fingers, "so it's quick and clean." The boys promised they would. The man continued, "Hangin's always a big ta-do. If ya ever get an invitation to one, it's best to be a witness - not the main event." The boys agreed. The father gave the noose a tug that bounced the small branch a bit and rattled leaves. The lesson ended with a warning. "Be careful with that."

Vivian noticed a group of girls braiding each other's hair and popping their chewing gum. They looked like cows chewing their cud. A fight broke out over a sock doll with red button eyes and blue yarn hair. Their excited voices rivaled nails on a chalk board. To end the argument, an aged woman took out her teeth. The shocked girls ran screaming, and the old woman laughed. She took off her wig as well, exposing sparse and wild white hair. Still fairly limber, she gave chase with her teeth in one hand and a snappy sapling in the other. Most of the little running legs got switched, even the ones who hadn't accused anybody of being an Indian-giver. When the woman needed to rest, the doll in question was finally given to the girl with berry-stained lips. The method of such decision-making was simple and sacred: "Eenie-meenie-mynie-mo, catch a nigger

by the toe. If he hollers let him go."

Vivian watched a woman walk by waving a wooden spoon, angrily calling, "Erik!" She stopped and asked Vivian, "You seen a little runt 'bout this high? Scrawny, no bigger'n a bug's ear? Green 'spenders an' black hair?" Vivian hadn't. The woman continued, "He's 'sposed to stay home. A bleeder, but quick as a cat." The woman continued her search and threatened the air, "Don't think I can't reach you, Erik!"

Walt stood amazed that Vivian didn't simply withdraw one step backward into the shadow of the tent and avoid the woman's advance. He thought perhaps the dance or even the Reverend John had made a positive effect. Being aired out over the past few days must've done her good. Vivian clasped hands behind her restless body and shifted on her feet. Walt began to imagine that her odd behavior was more of a nervous nature than mere interest in her neighbors. He approached the tent opening with his weak coffee - but didn't risk bothering his wife.

With Walt's limited view of the row, he could see an old war veteran. Everyone called him "The General." Grown-ups respected his considerable war record spanning over half a century, but behind his back the children took

to calling him "General Nuisance." Regardless, the old soldier sat on a stool two doors down, releathering his soles. Thunderous words rolled from his throat as he saw a child carrying an armload of kindling, "The bone yard is full of children who play with fire!" The boy scurried home while the General readjusted his uppers. He had a palate malady so his new teeth didn't fit proper. But volume helped his words to be understood beyond the bumping and slurring.

Then the little black-haired bleeder in green suspenders skipped by with a broad smile. He carried a fine bird's nest boasting quite a bit of horse hair woven amongst the twigs. Cradled in both hands, he held it high, tipping it slightly for Vivian to see past soft feathers lining the inner edge. Half a sky-blue egg rested inside. The boy passed the General but did not escape the thunder. "Your mother's after you, kid. Havin' a hissy fit." Erik skipped past, but the General added, "The bone yard is full of children who climb trees!"

Vivian had begun to pace. Walt couldn't imagine what made her so anxious. He could not wait any longer. Finishing his coffee, he asked, "What's got into you?"

Startled, Vivian flashed a scowl and did not answer

further. Walt tried to spy what could have moved his wife from her chair in the darkened space where she usually took comfort. He saw a couple walk by discussing how melancholy held on worse than hives and shingles. A young girl followed them, but walked backwards with a step and a hop, bouncing her curls. She sang about the heeby-jeeby-hiccum-ups, and nearly stumbled when a tumbleweed rolled across her path, full of duck feathers.

Other girls skipped rope to harsh little rhymes they made with a set beat. Topics came from news, and ranged from Romanovs to the poor Lindbergh baby. This particular morning's subject for the girls, however, was political. *"Huey Long/ Can do no wrong/ Mama says boot him/ Papa says shoot him/ Wealth for sharing/ Mighty daring/ White House ain't so far/ 'Cause he can out-promise/ Even F.D.R."* People took it for granted that of course Huey Long would be shot someday - and were waiting for it to happen.

Long had a dangerous habit of going round saying the rich should be content with a limit of no more than eight, maybe ten million dollars. And he said it right out loud. Walt knew that he and Vivian could certainly be comfortable on that.

Life in the camp seemed normal, except for Vivian

standing watch at the door, until suddenly a scream tore through the morning air. It was then that Walt saw the corner of Vivian's mouth turn upwards.

People stuck their heads out of tents and emerged into the rows. Children stopped skipping ropes and hanging robbers. Some sprinted toward the water while others moved cautiously. The scream came from the creek. The General shook his head and mumbled something about the bone yard being full of children who swim alone.

Clara ran, screaming from the tall reeds. The curious circled her, and followed her unsteady pointed finger. She sputtered her announcement: "A body."

Children were quickly corralled elsewhere so the adults could get a good look. Vivian and Walt took their turn as well. Rena's body lay still, with blood above her left ear, which had run in several streaks down her brow to the bridge of her nose. A final drop froze thick without falling to the dark pool on the ground it had formed when still warm. A nearby rock, also stained, lay beside the body. The soft breeze rolled hair and clothing, giving a sense of movement - and life. This reminded Walt of the fork in the road - when the wind mocked with cruel deceptions.

Two young boys were sent running to town for the doctor, but the investigation began without him. Rena's clothes were not terribly askew, suggesting nothing untoward. The rock had been jostled from its place in the mud, which could have happened when she tripped. No, she should have remained where she landed. Could she have gotten back up and finally fell, being stunned? But there was no dirt on her knees or hands. Comments quickly circulated as to the extent of the wound. Dizzy from loss of blood, she fainted and froze to death? No, so much blood, she died from the wound - from the rock. Rena wore only her nightclothes, and everyone tried to think of reasons she would go to the creek at night with no bucket. No lantern. No coat or shoes. Not natural at all. Someone noted that Rena's wedding ring must have been stolen, but Clara knew that ring had been sold a few years before, in a futile attempt to keep their farm.

The smell of whiskey and a bottle nearby caused an argument - won by those who insisted that Rena never drank - being a staunch teetotaler and advocate for dry states. Besides, her feet were clean. Elva and others gasped at the thought that someone happened by and robbed her of shoes and coat, lantern and bucket as well - then simply

left her to die. With everyone enduring the same hard times, who would deal such a rotten blow? It was something not even the banks had done.

Old Wayne, a particularly quiet man, surprised his neighbors by speaking. "I seen it before." Everyone hushed to hear what monsters Wayne had seen. He began: "People done it even before the market debacle. I worked accidents and fires down Denver way. Bein' new there, I didn't say much when others took whatever they liked. Folk we 'sposed to be helpin' would be in an awful fix - a house afire or dead under a car, or just screamin' and bleedin'. Didn't matter to them fellas. They lifted wallets and rings - whatever wasn't nailed down."

Wayne shook his head in sadness. "Shameful. Figured they deserved pay for volunteer work." He hesitated before adding, "I said I didn't say much then. Fact is, I didn't say a word - being new, and wantin' bad to belong." He then looked into the eyes of those near him, "Their nonsense changed fast, though, when I got to be Chief. Then hurtin' folks kept their goods. I made certain of that. They'd wake up in a hospital never spectin' to see any of it again. But they got it back."

Wayne chuckled, "The fellas thought I was stupid, but

folk started bringin' donations - puttin' cash right in my hand sayin' they knew it'd be spent proper. Pretty soon we had money for new equipment." His tone changed again, "I wasn't popular at the station, though. Even fellas I thought were my friends betrayed me in ways I don't care to discuss." When he thought of the main betrayer in those days, he added, "Hairiest man I ever saw," Wayne grimaced in disgust to no one in particular. "Hair long as a woman's, growin' right out of his back, and everyelsewheres. Almost makes ya wanna believe we did come from monkeys."

That ended Wayne's retelling of his days fighting all kinds of fires. He turned from the circle around the body, saying, "Men are less than they ought." Wayne went to contemplate the gurgling creek - changing and staying the same forever.

A few campers followed Wayne to the water and said they'd known him for years, but never heard that story. They asked why, but Old Wayne just shook his head and sighed. He wasn't in the habit of explaining the obvious or of tooting his own horn to bring attention to matters that ought to be common knowledge. Vivian heard volumes spoken in Wayne's silence, and respected the difference

between his strength and her own. Another kindred spirit, cut from the same cloth it seemed, valuing the same ideals. They were righters of wrongs.

Campers continued to study Rena's body, and asked each other whether they'd seen or heard any ruckus the night before. None had. A dog came to sniff at the blood, only to be quickly shooed away. The crowd began to disperse quietly, with all eyes looking through the reeds and water's edge for clues. Gathering elsewhere in knots, they discussed the tragedy. Sticky blood was more cold than dry, so opinions were exchanged regarding time of death.

The town doctor looked over the body and determined what was already known, so the mayor was roused out of bed to wire for the Torrington Sheriff. A local photographer offered to take official pictures. For lack of other volunteers, Reilly said he would go wake Thom, Rena's husband. No one wanted that job. Everyone assumed that if Clara's screams didn't wake him, he must have been drunk the night before.

It wasn't long before people noticed Reilly milling round, kicking at clods of morning mud. Elva shook a wooden spoon at him and shouted, "If you don't hurry, Thom'll stumble down here mad at her for not fixin' his

breakfast. If he trips over her, I'll beat you myself!"

Reilly answered indignantly, "I said I'd do it. Y'all heard me say it. God heard it, and all the angels. So how can I not do it? Answer me that, woman." Reilly stomped heavily to Thom's tent and then stopped, drew a deep breath to calm himself, and called softly. When there was no answer, Reilly applied more volume, and finally looked inside. Only two toddlers were just beginning to stir inside their bed. Reilly noted that Thom would not have gone to the road already. A crowd gathered to console the widower, but Reilly reported that Thom was missing. He quickly added, "He didn't run off 'cause his rifle and smokes is still here."

A few women took it upon themselves to care for the children until Thom could be found. People discussed details in low tones, recalling some legendary scraps that Rena and Thom survived over the years - downright brawls - with gouging, biting, and hair pulling. Vivian remembered Rena mentioning how angry they'd been with each other the time they were being shot at but they didn't care - only their rage toward each other mattered. Eventually, someone mentioned that the furniture store sold caskets reasonably priced.

"I might know where Thom's got to," Reilly offered, and pointed toward town. Sure enough, as soon as it was said, they saw a tall, lanky figure crossing the field. "He took up with the whores again." For many in the camp, being tired of his wife made Thom guilty of murder. And nobody doubted that a few dollars could buy a whore's story that Thom was with her all night long.

Sorry that he had volunteered, Reilly met Thom half way into the field. The mayor and doctor went also, hoping to note any tell-tale reaction. "Hold up, Thom," Reilly slid his hat from his head and laid the news out straight. "We found your wife yonder, Thom. She is done for."

The curious watched from the edge of camp and saw Thom fling a few angry words at Reilly and the two townsmen. He took off his hat, roughly shoved Reilly aside with it, and hurried toward camp. The mayor and doctor followed at his heels, but Reilly lingered behind.

Thom demanded, "Where is she?" People lowered their eyes - to avoid his. Thom darted through the rows, zigzagging until he found a gathering. Many were disappointed that Thom did not seem to know the way to the body. It had, in fact, been found by the reeds - in the other direction. This frustrated the sleuths and

complicated the investigation. Thom never looked toward the reeds by the creek. A guilty man would have expected to find her there.

Set to immortalize the husband's expression when first seeing his wife's body laid out in the mud, the photographer waited breathlessly. Glad that rigor had not yet fully set in, he posed his subject with spectacle in mind. Still, the photographer had to rub her arms and hands vigorously to get them to lie just right. The morning's long shadows stretched like bars across the victim who gracefully reached beyond her head but held nothing in relaxed hands. She faced the camera sleepily with one knee raised, letting the nightshirt fall loosely round her hips. She would grace the foreground of yet another artful portrait.

Women had been ushered away from the area, to avoid complaints about treatment of the body, but men were in on the ruse of it being moved. The photographer captured the prize of Thom's expression as he turned the corner and stopped dead in his tracks. The photo would be displayed on the studio wall and more than likely sold to a newspaper - then shown to the Sheriff when he came bird-dogging the culprit who had killed Rena.

Thom wept angrily over the body and vowed revenge. Pulling the nightshirt back down over cold legs, he lifted the torso into his arms and held it tight. He tried to gently brush aside a few strands of hair crossing her face, but they stuck beneath the hardening blood. Giving it a more forceful tug, the flesh on her face moved as if she had smiled, or winced. Reilly came with a bed sheet to cover the body while Thom sobbed and apologized to the corpse. He also made it promises.

Women were allowed back into the area, as well as children who had been made to heel with great effort. Told only that someone passed, they were allowed to watch the body being placed on a door borrowed from town. Thom and Reilly carried it to the doctor's house.

The General pointed to Rena's bare feet and announced, "The bone yard is full of children who get their feet wet."

The few prayers offered as she passed were drowned out by murmurs of hindsight - that it wouldn't have happened if the whoremonger had been home where he belonged. Slowly, the crowd thinned. It was a workday like any other.

Vivian went home and sat in her chair to sew. Walt followed, eyeing her with a fair amount of disapproval. "You sure lost all interest right sudden for the goings-on

out there, Viv."

With satisfaction, she sighed, "Y'all are late for work."

Uncharacteristically, Walt kicked his wooden chair into the table, which rattled toward Vivian's rocker. She bolted a surprised look and became worried when Walt walked a few steps closer. "I got an inkling you knew 'bout a body waitin' t'be found."

Vivian recovered her demeanor and lowered her eyes into narrow slits, "What I know, Walter, is we need your pay." He hated it when she emphasized the first syllable of his name, effectively calling him an inflexible wall. Vivian continued sewing, keeping watchful of Walt's movements. Having nothing further to say, he collected his lunch: a softening potato and hardening hunk of bread wrapped in a piece of old newspaper blown in by the wind days earlier. He stuck the package inside his shirt and turned to leave.

Vivian dashed toward the door to get in a few kicks as he was leaving.

Walt ignored her, but stepped up his pace. He passed men wiping fearful tears from their wives' cheeks - who whispered that a murderer walked among them. The men

offered some consolation by pointing to old men armed with shotguns and pistols patrolling the camp. Boys who were too young to work, but old enough to handle a rifle, were also standing guard. Girls and all toddlers lay tucked away inside tents. Men, full of worry, made their way to the road. They passed the noose used earlier for play. Reilly moved it to a limb extending over the reeds near where the body was found. It swung in the morning breeze - a promise to the villain.

Chapter 15 - Dust to Dust

Now, at least, Vivian's neighbors had something else to wag their tongues about. Town folk debated on a proper burial place for Rena. When campers had the misfortune of giving up their ghosts far from any town, they were just buried beside the road - or, if money could be had, the body would be shipped home by rail to the deceased's people. That was not typical in such times. Rena died near this town, which had a perfectly good cemetery boasting plenty of room - even though the grave digger was busy making a hole for Mr. Fox.

Besides, Thom had spent all his ready money on the whores. Some churches had private graveyards, but space was limited - or the new occupant had to meet particular requirements. Being dead was only one of them.

Thom opted to bury his wife's remains about a mile out on the prairie, away from the creek so as not to upset the town. He chose a spot within spitting distance from a half buried old steer skull with horns still attached - bleached by the sun. Knowing a bit of math, Thom triangulated a spot from the water tower, a particular church steeple and the old bent tree where the noose waited. This way, he

could find the spot again if he ever returned and discovered the wind had uprooted her marker. More than likely, the grasses would swallow it like everything else.

Thom's behavior raised a few brows. While Rena lay on a board being examined in the doctor's parlor, Thom went to dig the hole. Physical work gave him release, and he was thankful the earth wasn't frozen through as it would be farther north. The work also left him unbothered by whispers, and by those, with good intentions, who wished to know how he's holding up - or worse, those who wanted to lift his spirits. He could tolerate those who offered a bottle, but not the talkers. A few men offered to help with the digging, feeling he must be near exhausted. Thom ignored them. When they brought their own shovels they were met with a sudden swing from Thom's own harsh shovel. It was his hole to dig.

Close friends stayed near, and stayed quiet. Their wives took Thom's toddlers under their wing and other women oversaw Rena's examination. One black withered breast, quite afflicted, deformed the otherwise lovely, pale corpse. Vivian remembered Rena's worry of the plague, and let the word escape before she could capture and hold it back. The doctor shook his head and assured the ladies

that Rena's condition had come over time. "This ain't that," he said. "Black Death was swift as the wind. As the saying goes: you felt fine in the morning - ate lunch with friends, and supper with ancestors. Besides, the evils this woman suffered did not kill her. A rock did."

Clara asked the doctor, "So the rock was more merciful than her ailment?"

"I said it was quicker."

"Quick is merciful."

"She was young."

"At least her children won't have to watch the darkness take her completely. They can remember her well."

Women wondered in whispers and remembered what the Reverend John had said. The Lord took Rena, and it was perfect. Why - they didn't know, and didn't need to know. Others disagreed. Rena certainly looked like she had suffered unnecessarily. Was she created for each thought, each breath, and for that final moment as well? If so, the rock had served its purpose after waiting eons to do so. Women felt small as they discussed grand purposes - yet each knew that no cog in a divine plan could be insignificant. And if there is no divine plan, there is little significance for any of them. Their opinions

differed - for comfort's sake or for vanity. Vivian left the doctor's parlor as the discussion shifted from purposeful rocks to a divine plan for prisons.

The body was washed with perfumed soap and oils after muscles loosed again - when the rigor subsided. Loins were wrapped tightly with much cloth to contain the fluiding. Thom chose a burial dress and shoes for the body. He lamented that he could not find a hat with a veil that covered the whole face. Rena only had a few hats with loose mesh that either gathered on the brim or could be pulled just enough to cover the eyes. Thom wanted her distorted expression to seem more restful. He watched as Elva combed the hair, careful to pick out dried clumps of blood. She then applied a bit of rouge and painted cold lips. A sock full of rice had been placed across the eyes, trying to hold them closed. Clara sewed ribbons from a bonnet onto the hat that Thom chose, so there would be a strap for the chin.

Her hands were placed serenely across the breast, with a small Bible held close under an arm and a family photo pressed between fingers. Walt wished he had paid the photographer for a likeness of his children when he had the chance. He'd have done it after they died, as many people

often did, but Vivian wanted no one to know.

Thom undertook the construction of a box made of old lumber donated by the town. Months earlier, new lumber was brought in to rebuild the schoolhouse and livery after a tornado chewed half the old buildings away. Discarded remnants were parceled out as firewood to townspeople who were eager to rid themselves of the memory - when witches teats fell from a black sky and brought death. Tom laid in the coffin to check it for size and strength. It wouldn't do to have the body fall through and tumble into the grave before the box.

Boys were sent to collect Shepherdspurse, a winter weed with white clustered blossoms sporting heart-shaped fruit and stars beneath their leaves. Cinnamon and spices were brought, as well as other blooms from the field - found by smaller children. Others drew pictures of trees and sunshine, flowers and butterflies on the box. Rena's name was written on the lid, and people wrote friendly personal messages. Some felt this was pointless, if not a sacrilege altogether, as Rena was no longer with them. Others said each gesture must be let. Reflection on mortality is healthful. Funerals are for the living.

Perfume was dabbed on wrists and behind ears while

black humor began from certain huddles out of Thom's earshot. "At least Rena's not got the summer heat," they touched their noses and chuckled. Others suggested getting the whores to donate perfume so Thom would recognize the scent. Many felt they would be able to read the identity of the guilty party by expressions at the funeral. Jule even tried to get a few bets placed.

Elva enlightened the unaware of all the brutal details concerning embalming. "It adds insult to injury - and being bled an' pickled is the least of it. Tell yer people ya don't want it. If ever there's a violence done to a corpse, be sure embalming takes that prize."

Thom couldn't afford to have his wife preserved anyway, and spent his time fretting over something else - suffering for his personal neglect of the body. He had forgotten to carry out a final request, of which Rena had often spoke. Thom had promised to have an artery cut before burial, to make certain she was dead. But he kept himself busy digging the grave and building the box. The body was washed and dressed before he remembered her fears of being buried alive.

Rena had fussed over so many news accounts and personal recollections of finding bodies in tormented

positions when later relocation required disinterment, and the state of the corpse was found - fingers chewed off, handfuls of hair clutched in fists, or laying on their side holding their knees tight. It was a persistent problem. Doctors get better at determining death, but since they always improve, they are always imperfect.

When Rena would get herself into a particular fit on the subject, Thom suggested he simply stick her with pins, rather than cut an artery. That method had made several members of the supposedly dead revive from their stupor and thank the person who stuck them - after cussing them out, of course. But cutting an artery would kill her if she wasn't already dead. Still, Rena insisted it was the only way.

The oldest women in the camp knitted beautiful carnations that looked rather real from a distance. Colors of peach, yellow and blue were created in long strips a few inches wide - gathered taut and curled into waves which imitated folds of flowers in bloom. Other women of that certain age also made lace roses. Petals wrapped about each other, secured at the bottom to make delicate buds. Those women with ruddy complexions worked in silence, or hummed hymns with raspy voices.

Young girls assisted most of the day, nimbly creating while their feet swung beneath their chairs. Plump, pink, smooth features contrasted sharply against their elder's. Tiny veins like ivy interlaced on elderly nostrils - the color of aged grapes. Fans of deeply folded flesh graced the edges of eyes, which bore red pinpoint blood-blister freckles on soft tissue. Velvety, it hung loosely from throats and over shoulders like fine cloth over sculpture. The drapery noted the time with concentrated movements, swinging as a pendulum from a clock. Wispy pure white hair sometimes escaped the pins atop their heads and fell like feathers across jaws - soft as taffeta. Purple rivers rising from the plains of their arms and hands rarely followed straight paths, but twisted and forked onto new routes - yet none were off course. At the very banks of these pulsing rivers grew islands of yellow and green with large, dark brown, tender patches surrounded by smaller freckles. The canvas cracked in its time. This thin, almost translucent veil over life was fragile. Tender, almost raw. It stretched tight like a drum that would bleed if bumped.

Rubbing moisture from eyes with knotted knuckles, the women labored on counterfeit flowers. Joints ached and

seized up, causing delay, but young girls must be taught - so lace roses could decorate all celebrations: births, weddings and, of course, coffins when the time came. For themselves, perhaps next winter. The old women wondered.

The salt of the earth earned a place by the fire. Old men kept fires burning and pondered their turn as well. Would anyone build them a box? A few could not control tremors - having lost their power. No dust lit on their limbs, which continually shook. Their spark dimmed with each passing day. Nevertheless, feeble-yet-forgetful sure beats nimble-yet-thoughtless all day long. When telling their stories, their fire was fanned, lighting their eyes. It was proved then: they still owned a bit of kick and sparkle, sparkle and spit.

Waiting for the funeral, wrinkled heads bounced in little nods and twitches. Desolate yet noble crowns were left spotted above bushy brows hanging heavy over sleepy eyelids. Dark bruising shadows rested beneath thinning lashes, but some bore large areas of strangely pink flesh from the corners of tired eyes onto the bridge of their nose - the only real color on their gray faces. Behind those old eyes, thoughts surfacing most were of the late hour. Patchwork grids of lines worthy of lizards ran their

course at the edges of those sunken eyes, somber maps to former glories. The grids were deep, but trailed shallow onto smooth soft, sallow cheeks. Stately chins had become craggy cliffs, boasting a cavernous cave, full of treasure-tales if anyone had the time to search. Toothless time stole most of their laughter. Nose hair, like small tumbleweeds, tangled into overgrown mustaches. White whiskers swirled in lacy designs over gaunt jaws and throats. This covering spared most bony shoulders, leaving them bare but for the freckling. Then the snowy swirls began again on chests - which these men scratched when not rubbing stiff quivering hands within warmth taken from the fire.

Old timers are a denouement, opening the door for silence to enter with a welcome sigh. Some try to bar that door for more time, but in the end no one succeeds. From their dust and ashes other flowers bloom. The purpose for failing senses is to make men believe a long snuggle with the earth is best. Young girls had not noticed any of this - not the dimming spark in old men's eyes, not the pale draping skin over sculptures sitting beside them, not the underlying quiet of grim expectation.

A wagon brought the body back to camp for viewing. It

was meant to continue in such employ the next day on its journey to the prairie. That night, though, men who had gone to the road stopped by Thom's tent to pay their respects. The camp was not quiet. Disgruntled voices in the lamplight spoke of Boss. He was clearly upset that Thom, Reilly and a few others had not shown for work on the road. If they buried Rena the next day, more work would be missed. The funeral must be held that very night.

The wagon creaked and moaned while campers walked behind with their lanterns. The very young and very old rode in wagons of their own. They stopped graveside, and encircled the area, where lanterns made the hole seem deeper. Darker. The newly created carnations and roses were tucked inside the coffin and placed on the body. Thom kissed Rena's cold lips - then he told his eldest child who was only four, "Kiss your mama goodbye."

The child responded frankly, "That ain't mama." Then he moved behind his father's legs.

The Reverend John was asked to perform the service. He spoke of finality, and of hope. "The body is a cruel prison. Death is a gift so we don't live in this wretched fallen flesh forever. That's why we got kicked out of the garden, you know. A gift - it's not one of the curses."

He added that heart-ache is promised each of us from the womb, relieved only by death. For the wicked, problems get worse after death. "But for us," he waved his hat quietly toward the campers, "there is no fear of death and damnation. The righteous will live in glory forever as heirs to the Kingdom. Amen." Softly, the crowd repeated, "Amen."

Ropes were placed beneath the coffin at head and foot. Men on both sides let it down carefully, lowering the ropes evenly into the grave. Accompanied by chirping crickets and growling stomachs, a few women sang haunting old hymns - the kind that didn't just tug at the heart, but ones that touch the soul. Words were spoken by those who knew Rena well, and from anyone else who wished to speak.

Men put shovels to earth, but Thom could not let it be done. He jumped into the grave and landed on the box with a great thud. He had spread his weight by spreading his feet so as not to fall through. He dug his boots into soil beside the box while he lifted the lid. Gasps and prayers quickly spread, but Thom's friends knew what he was doing. They firmly told everyone to calm themselves and leave the man alone.

Thom took a firm grip on his pocket knife. With one

hand he covered and turned Rena's face upward to expose her throat. With the other he slashed her, severing an artery which no longer pumped blood. Wiping away tears, Thom again stood on the lid. He put his knife away. Silhouetted faces blocked stars surrounding the grave. Stooping beneath stars, men extended their hands to lift him out.

The Reverend John mumbled, "Now I have seen it all."

Thom put the first handful of dirt on the coffin. The noise rattled through the night. He picked up each of his children and held their hand in his, scooping tiny fingers into the mound of earth, to toss into the grave. "Bury your mama." Others followed in kind, and then Thom and his friends finished with shovels. A wooden cross bearing Rena's name would be driven into the spot when the last of the dirt was packed into place.

When people began to file back to camp, it was a signal to a deaf man waiting in the steeple to let church bells sing. Heavy notes cut through the silence with promise. Most of those who had not yet shed tears, did at that time. The crickets had fallen silent as the temperature dropped. Long mournful cries of a fiddle followed after the heavy bells. Campers contemplated each

singular breath they drew just as the previous one pushed out ahead to swirl a mist in the night air. If it weren't for funerals, the new day's light is not properly appreciated.

Vivian followed Walt home and wondered whether there would be such tenderness at her own funeral. She presumed that when her time came she wouldn't care. Still she didn't want to be forgotten - or worse, that anyone would feel relief. Certainly Walt would miss her. Then she felt anger when doubting her certainty. Vivian didn't want to waste another moment on the subject. She decided to visit Thom first thing in the morning to inquire on the sale price of Rena's bread - which by then should be a bargain for being two days old.

Chapter 16 - Vivian's Dream

Vivian dreamt of her childhood that night. This particular dream kept resurrecting itself no matter how many times she killed it by waking. It placed her back in the summer she turned seven, and spent several months at her grandparents' farm. Her mother was sick with something her grandmother named the fruit of wickedness - but her father called it Betrayal.

The dream began in the usual way. A lovely buggy ride with her parents down Little Bear Route. They slowed to turn south. Two tall wooden pillars framed both sides of the entrance. A beam across the top bore a suspended sign declaring the worn family name. It squeaked, swinging on rusty chains. Avoiding the ruts, they traveled along the high portion of the long road to the prairie house which they saw in the distance.

Tall golden grass bowed and then swayed with a loving breeze as Vivian passed. There was no other kind of air experienced so fully until this summer. Now she could smell the flowers, and it seemed as though the cattle and sheep waved their tails quickly for a welcome, but the trees in the distance waved slowly. Those strong, tall

trees stood like sentries protecting the stone house that rose from the prairie cleared for crops. Butterflies and birds bowed their wings gracefully, as if swimming in water. The tall grass danced as far as she could see. Then Vivian's view was abruptly cut short at the base of the stone walls where the grass stopped. The dirt created an effect like a wide brown moat encircling the castle. The soil there - with patches of browning grass trying to die - rolled and splashed against the cold stones, and receded again into its depth.

The house was indeed a fortress where her grandmother, Nettie, lived like a Queen. She always ran out to greet the wagon. Her pale dress billowed behind her, and her long, wild, white hair standing every which way to wave as well. She'd laugh, cry and clasp her hands in front of her face and nod forward, bending at the waist. Fully happy. Each time was the same. She held out her arms calling, "Vivian Mae! My Vivian Mae!" And when Vivian would take her grandmother's hand to step out of the buggy, it and her parents began to fade and disappear. Vivian noticed, and asked where they could have gone, but the Queen had waved them away and began speaking of cows that would need milking and chickens needing to be fed. Also, baskets full

of chokecherries required picking and preserving. The Queen had already put up peaches.

Vivian learned to squirt the cow's teat at the wild kittens. They sat waiting for it at milking time. She usually missed their mouths, but they lapped the goodness from wherever it landed. The old milk cow's swollen belly hung low beneath tawny hip bones jutting sharply on either high side of the ridge of her back - and she had a dark spirit. That Holstein had been gotten from a dairy and so she only understood swear words. Vivian had to speak her foul language to get her milked.

Cows with names typically are friendlier and give more milk, but this cow didn't like her name. The dairymen called her Nicodemus, so Vivian shortened it to Nicky - but it didn't help her disposition. She'd pick up her hoof ever so gently and set it down in the bucket of milk - then turn her big brown eyes toward Vivian to witness the frustration. Nicky was feisty - able to run off full-grown men as if she were part bull - but she tolerated the young milkmaid to a point. Without fail, that cow would swat Vivian in the eye with her tail. All the filth, dry and not so dry, would get in Vivian's hair. Then the flies followed her all day long.

Vivian also learned to wear the Queen's tall, old cowboy boots, so difficult to walk in, but necessary while feeding the chickens. Chickens are mean. They could be hypnotized though. After an old one was chosen for supper, it would watch the Queen draw a line with her finger across the bloody block. Then it could not run wild after its head was chopped off. Without this step, they had to wait until it got done running all round the yard without its head. When younger, the Queen found that spectacle amusing, but grew tired of fetching the body after it finally dropped.

Vivian didn't know why a hypnotized head, once unattached, should continue to keep the body still - and she wondered if the chicken was at all bothered that its head was being tossed for the others to consume. She shuddered at the memory of holding them by the neck and spinning their bodies until their head twisted off - the body fluttered wildly, trying to run. The twisting was only done when the axe could not be found or if its iron head had flown off its handle and hadn't yet been repaired.

Regardless, the chosen one should be retrieved from the block immediately since the others came to peck at it madly. Vivian had seen this cruelty before when a wounded

chicken was targeted fairly, and the others attacked its sore spot without ceasing until pecked to death. It shouldn't matter since this particular chicken was meant for supper, but it was too much bother to be amidst the furious clucking to wrestle it away. Vivian thought about this often, questioning whether the headless chicken was dead - or just dying - while bleeding peacefully under hypnosis. She didn't know which of the headless were more dead: the peaceful ones or the runners.

Once the cream had finished rising to the top of the milk, Vivian would spoon several inches of it off while still a bit warm, and slap it into a separate jar to be churned later. Vivian's other chores included picking the mealworms out of the sugar bowl and hauling hearth ashes to spread round the perimeter of the little garden. The smell of a burning kept rabbits away.

Vivian disliked getting grain for the cows. A half dozen or so mice would be in the barrel each morning. They could crawl in but not get out, as the inside of the barrel was slick. She wondered why the Queen had not planted mint around the perimeter of the barn to keep the mice away as they had done to the house. Vivian wore the Queen's gloves to handle the tiny creatures. She'd grab their tails and

watch them curl their bodies up round her gloved fingers and then look at her and twitch their whiskers for mercy. Vivian did enjoy watching them but was met with laughter when she suggested keeping one.

"A pet? That's what old dogs are for," the Queen would say. "Animals are only good for workin' and eatin'. Not for nonsense. Even a pet is for teachin' ya to care for it, else it'll up and die. A dog can at least bark when somethin' is amiss. Gotta be good for somthin' more'n just here to make you smile. But, I 'spose that's a kind of work, too."

With a proper flick of the wrist Vivian slapped each mouse hard against a thick rail and threw it to the chickens. She enjoyed taking care of a lamb that its mother rejected. Vivian got to feed it with a rubber nipple stretched over a bottle full of warmed milk. She also fed the sheep when they came in from the field toward evening. Cows usually came home first in anticipation of being fed grain, but they didn't get it until the sheep came in for theirs. One heifer named Magpie had learned the system - knowing she'd be fed grain if the sheep got fed. Once she caught on, she rounded up the sheep, herding them in like a dog.

Vivian always thought the family shouldn't eat a smart cow, but the Queen said, "With a little bit of gravy they taste the same as the dumb ones."

At some point in the dream, the sheep were not so fluffy and white anymore, and the cows soon began to sulk rather than wave their tails. The birds didn't bow in the sky or wave and the tall grass no longer danced. Even the mean chickens hid in their coop. This was when Dread came home in a slow moving shadow. The sun cowered. It became dark. The Ogre, whom the Queen would not have married but claims she once did, was as thick as the castle wall and as tall as the sentries. When he wasn't working on the railroad, he had the run of the farm and ordered the Queen to work for him.

The Ogre had a giant cement block in the yard that only he could see into when he lifted the metal lid. He put things in there to burn. "Gotta incin'rate what's not wanted," he said gruffly, and added that the hole was big enough for little girls. One of his giant hands grabbed Vivian's arm while his other scooped her leg out from under. She was lifted up. He held her high over the opening as the fire crackled beneath. His body quaked with laughter inside his worn overalls, as her screams thrilled

him so. It was this practice that he called high humor. As soon as he set her back down, always with a shove, she would run in slow motion, fearing his laughter, his hands, and the weight of him.

Vivian spent her days trying to avoid the Ogre. This was difficult as he regularly sought her out, asking for favors. He sent her into the barn to retrieve tools, the names of which she never knew, but they made sense in the dream. At this point he usually saw a mouse and quickly moved his giant boot toward it. She heard bones breaking under his enormous weight. Picking the smashed creature up by its tail, he tossed it in the incinerator. Vivian went to get the tool.

The barn rested in shadows, but once inside she could see everything. Tools were high above her head, just resting against the walls or hanging on nails. She saw shovels, hammers, rope, bridles, ladders, and a lot of hay where the wild cats lived. Nobody shot the cats here: they earned their milk by trying to keep the mouse population at a manageable level. Vivian saw barrels of feed, buckets and pitchforks, tarps, lanterns and utensils with no names.

At this point in the dream the lights always went out.

Even the shadows fled and hid from the darkness. It occurred to Vivian that every time the Ogre wanted her to find something for him, the big wooden shutters closed together at once - like giant hands reaching around to cover her eyes. Any other time they were open and sunlight filled the barn. Vivian found herself in the dark, which was always when the Dragon came.

She never saw the Dragon, but the creature came from the darkness, picked her up and stuck its tongue in her mouth. It's hot breath smelled of the Ogre's pipe tobacco. She attempted a muffled shriek and tried to wriggle away. That's when it laughed and ran to hide, after shoving her backwards to the ground harshly. Vivian also wanted to find a place in the dark to hide, but she just hunkered down to wait and cry while listening to the Dragon's footsteps thunder away. Fortunately, the Ogre would always come to save her by opening the shutters and ask with a chuckle, "What's wrong here?"

Vivian left the barn quickly, past the Ogre's laughter, and ran to her grandmother's side. The Queen was always interested in stories of dragons and would promptly tell the Ogre about it in private, pleading with him in strong terms: "Stop it!" But how could the mighty Ogre

stop the Dragon who lives in the dark? Vivian never liked the Ogre, but she did worry that there would be blood spilt over this. While the Queen was still yelling at him to stop it, the Ogre would leave but not go to the barn. He would go where a friendly neighbor lived. Vivian knew only of a nearby widow who drank.

A dark mood overtook the Queen whenever the Ogre went visiting. When this happened, she'd get very quiet and pace the floor, slamming a door now and then to punctuate an obscenity that begged to be purged from her soul - words that the Queen could not hold.

Then the dream got better. The sun would rise, filling the castle with light. Vivian would rise in the morning, but not to the smell of coffee or the sound of bacon in the pan. On this morning she found the Queen out in the yard beyond the sandy waves of the moat where fruit trees once had grown. Now, the Queen harvested beets. The old woman's dress billowed about her legs, which straddled a row of her garden. She laughed while red beet juice ran down her chin and neck. She wouldn't share with Vivian though. Angry, she'd push her away, and with a high pitched squeak she managed to let out the word: "Mine!" Chunks of beet and deep red juice flowed over her gums with

that effort. She enjoyed smashing and smearing the beets all over her face while she laughed.

Vivian never saw the Ogre again. Just about the time she noticed that he was gone for good, the Queen had planted those red beets. When Vivian asked where he went, the Queen said he left town. Then she'd break out with a series of squeaky bits of laughter, adding, "And moved to hell!" Vivian Mae was certain that the Dragon left town with the Ogre - for it seemed to be gone also. She didn't miss either one of them.

The Queen's hair shone bright in the sunshine, regularly weaving itself into different windy white crowns. Then it unwove itself to whip the air. She spent a lot of time there in her garden, eating her beets and rubbing juice over her face. Nettie seemed happiest out there beyond the hedge. She didn't even bother to come inside to urinate. She did it on the beets, saturating her dress, stockings and shoes - laughing all the while. Vivian saw that her own stockings had become soaked red.

That's the point when the dream ended and she always woke, needing to use the piss pot. She had not had that dream since the day she let the fire go out. Vivian hated the cold.

Chapter 17 - Adventure

Vivian sent Walt off to work as usual with his lunch package of potato and bread tucked inside his shirt. She gave him a canteen full of cold creek water, and then turned her back on him, effectively announcing there would be nothing further offered to launch his day. After hearing him leave, she packed her things in a worn carpet bag and didn't leave a note.

Not bothering to wash the dishes or make the bed, Vivian retrieved the iron rooster from where Walt stuffed it under an overturned crate. She put it back on the table to eye him when he came home. It didn't matter if anyone saw her leave, but she did want to slip about unrecognized - unbothered. The air was as light as Vivian's step. She practically skipped across the field. Without her naughty little adventures she felt certain she'd go mad.

Vivian had searched for Walt's stash - the secret little fortune he hid since he didn't trust banks. He trusted her even less. Unable to find it, she took his mother's jeweled hat pins and broaches that he saved in case they ever fell on truly hard times - yet Vivian wasn't certain how life could get much worse. At least Walt

always seemed able to get work. Without that, they would starve like many others.

Vivian felt she could find a buyer for Walt's treasures in the town. The couple had discussed selling those valuables when it came time to buy land of their own, perhaps by next autumn. He promised her that after the road was finished they would move into a soddy while he built her a wooden house. To her mind, a tent that rattled and nearly gave way to the wind was far better than sturdy mud blocks. That kind of enclosure would be like living in a grave. Yet she knew that earth and straw is all that bricks essentially are, and so amount to the same as a soddy. A proper house, to her way of thinking, should be wooden, since trees reach skyward. And Walt had promised. Still, the only wooden house she felt she'd likely get was a coffin.

Reflecting on these issues made Vivian decide that being buried for a year or so in a soddy would be worth the inconvenience. Then she'd triumphantly leave it as if resurrected. It was nice to think about, even as she marched herself toward the train station. Settling down permanently with Walt was a frightful thought. She didn't want to get comfortable. When her sailor came for her, and

she believed he would, she needed to be unfettered.

The little church with a tall, white steeple caught Vivian's eye again. It wouldn't hurt to take a peek inside. Wooden steps sagged low in the center like a sway back horse. Paint had begun peeling along the edges by both railings, and gone completely in the middle where foot fall was heaviest. Faint imperfections such as those were why Vivian made it her business to keep people from getting too close to her: little flaws escape notice from a distance.

Vivian stopped mid-way and looked up, steadying herself by holding the rail. She hoped to see beneath the bell, but couldn't spy the steeple at all. Her view, obscured by the eaves and gable, bore several spider webs high in the corners above the door. Vivian's mother always spoke in a tone of indignation against a neighbor who never bothered to disturb cobwebs in her home. She claimed with a giggle that they were a science experiment. That neighbor had cut off all her hair to the scalp out of shame when her daughter went bad one summer. She had run off with an older man - like a new experiment. Vivian had known the girl and often wondered whether she was happy.

Opening the church door slowly, Vivian was surprised

to find anyone there during the middle of a work day. Spirited conversations could be heard inside. A large dimpled woman bustled through the door in a hurry and breezed past Vivian, waving a motion toward those inside the church. "Don't mind them any," she said. "They could have a fine time arguin' with a fence post." The woman suddenly stopped to take a good look at Vivian and spoke more softly, "Why, you're from the camp, ain't ya?" Vivian almost replied when the woman took her hand and patted it, drawing closer to look deeply into the visiting eyes, "Welcome, honey. Services ain't till Sunday. You missed the prayer meetin' and choir is full. But you must come Sunday. I'll see you then. And don't mind them in there. I swear, they could do more good if they'd mend this place as much as they talk, but none o' my sass puts a hammer in their hands." She stopped herself from leaving again and spun round, "You got plenty to eat, honey? You hungry?"

Vivian was glad to have left her bag on the ground beside the steps and hoped the woman would not notice. She shook her head even though she really was a bit hungry. This woman had the habit of purging herself of words regularly like poor ol' dead Rena. Vivian had often heard exclamations of how many large women live in Wyoming. No

surprise, she thought: that particular sentiment was always said by small men.

The large woman looked at Vivian hard for a moment to make sure, and then wagged her finger. "None o' you out there should be wantin' for nothin' along this stretch o' land. We got plenty, and we love to share. Share to love, too. Me and God won't have it no other way. Sign the book in there yonder and make a note if you have need." As she left, the woman provided a few words to harmonize with her heavy heels which sang out into the air: "Mercy, Lord, mercy."

Vivian thanked her, too late to be heard, but she caught a bit of her perfume as the breeze carried it by. Flowers, like her mother's garden. Vivian missed her mother, and decided she liked the large woman - although not well enough to sign the book. She would be leaving town as soon as she peeked inside.

There. A large but plain wooden cross prominently decorated the far front wall, with several simple pews bearing minimal carving on either side of the single aisle pointing to the pulpit - only one step higher than the rest of the room. Flanked by a shushed piano and an empty choir box on the other side of the pulpit, all the solemn

furniture waited for Sunday. No one took any notice of Vivian as she stood in the doorway, so she ventured in for a closer look. The cross wasn't polished, but was roughly hewn. It wouldn't do for folk to see their own reflection and begin worshipping themselves.

Groups of disquieted men and women huddled in lively discussion near Vivian at the back of the church. They stood by the rear table which held many hymn books, collection plates, gentlemen's hats, and the prayer request book with a fountain pen used as a bookmark. The women were dressed casually, and two wore trousers. They were dusting and mopping, while debating in whispers whether Adam and Eve really had belly buttons as some paintings suggest.

Men were inside overalls or gentleman-suits showing varying years and miles. The youngest men were angriest and the elders were irritated but too tired to fuss. Regardless of age or station, each took his turn, inserting opinions. Vivian surmised their conversation had something to do with the new road which would tease the town into expansion. Naturally, people didn't want to get the bad which hangs on the shirt-tail of the good. Progress is like some old bull-dog with its teeth in a man's leg.

It'll hurt to beat it loose, and hurt to leave it be.
Still, nobody wants to judge before the beast bites.
Vivian walked the aisle to the front, unnoticed - ignored -
the way she liked it.

One balding gent found the needed passage for his argument. He slammed his palm onto the Word and then jabbed a finger skyward. "Greed amounts to idolatry, as much as immorality!"

The men huddled closer to study the implications while the women began washing tall pointed windows. Vivian felt them watching her as she stepped behind the pulpit and moved toward the cross. She had run her fingers over the curves of the pews, and the smooth edges of the pulpit as she passed. Now she reached for the unvarnished cross.

"You lost?" A soft voice asked from behind.

Startled, Vivian jolted at the sound of the voice, which drove a splinter deep into her palm. She turned to view the woman holding a mop. "No, I'm just interested in architecture." She moved round the woman quickly. "Excuse me." Her thoughts returned to her goal that morning of stealing away, so she slipped quietly outside.

On the steps she rubbed her palm in the sunlight. Her skin only thinly covered the little wooden spear. She

tried to grasp the exposed part and slide the rest out. But it broke off. Vivian collected her bag and looked back to see the bell unmoved. Then she scurried off to hunt a buyer for her husband's heirlooms.

There were several small shops on the main street. Vivian longed for the larger towns out East that boasted asphalt and stone streets. She used to know ladies who would rather die than live like camped animals - foregoing all conveniences, hauling water in buckets, sharing the dirt floor with worms, and freezing at night. Cities had electricity and plumbing even in the out buildings. She'd even seen machines dispensing cigarettes instead of just chewing gum or books. Progress. Just what this town needed. On the other hand, she knew she could tolerate all manner of hardship and desolation if Walt were her sailor.

As Vivian walked the boards she saw the Reverend John yelling fervently at a few prostitutes - condemning their state of dress, not to mention the general wicked nature of their business. Behind smeared and melting cosmetics, the women sassed him in turn. He was able to thump one on her powdered forehead with his Bible before they fled back into the shadows. His arthritic knees prevented a pursuit, but his words raced ahead of his failing flesh and overtook the

women. "Don't take up with the devil himself in damnation!" They covered their bejeweled ears and kept running.

Vivian liked the Reverend John, and rooted for him. He was the underdog in this changing world. Afraid he'd seen her and would want to speak, Vivian ducked round a corner, and spied him stop to talk to a ragged, sickly man coughing his insides out and wiping blood on his sleeves. The Reverend John helped the man toward steps of a nearby shop. Trembling, the lunger retrieved a cigarette butt from his pocket, and several others fell out. He hoarded a collection, picked from the ground. The preacher told him to sit tight, and he'd be back with a blanket and biscuits. Holding the unlit bit of paper and tobacco between his lips, and holding his head in his hands, the man sat and waited. A no-hoper.

Vivian passed children headed for the schoolhouse with their books bundled and tied with a belt strap. Soon enough, she spied a shop. Beyond the window glass, a well-groomed starchy man balanced a pencil behind his ear and studied a ledger. He leaned forward on the counter, but smiled and stood erect when the little bell above the door sounded as Vivian entered.

Politely, he studied her broaches and hat pins.

"They's beauties alright, but there ain't much demand for this style no more." He said he would do what he could, of course, to help her.

Vivian knew that many women were no longer wearing hats requiring pins, but had taken to a skull cap worn like a feminine helmet, hiding whatever hair they had left. The shopkeep fingered the pile of Walt's trinkets while Vivian remembered her grandmother securing her hat with a pin, stabbing then sliding it through a pile of dark sculpted locks. Wearing hats while praying was something a woman could do for the sake of the angels. But many women were foregoing their hats altogether - even to church or court. Perhaps angels would become angry, and she wondered for a moment what they thought of her. She rarely wore a hat, but then, she rarely prayed.

Looking up through his brow, the man kept his eyes fixed on Vivian's expression as he slid several coins across the counter. "I'll give this for the whole lot, and I'm makin' a gift of it, truly."

Vivian felt his eyes, but kept hers on the coins. Sighing, she lifted her eyelashes and let her gaze move to his hands, gnarled with large knuckles, and then to his

cuffs rolled up near the elbows which rested on the counter again. Finally her glance moved upwards to his slight grin. She did not give away her disappointment, but instead determined to show him that she understood the few rules of this game. She toyed with the buttons of her dress. "Is there any way you could give me more?"

He searched her face for a moment and read her meaning. He nodded, "Yes, Ma'am. I think you're right. I might just see fit to give what you're needin'." He went to the window, looked left and right along the board walk and then flipped the sign on the door from "open" to "closed." He locked the door.

Taking Vivian gently by the arm he led her round the counter corner. "We should be able to find agreement fair enough right in here." He held open a cloth doorway for her to pass. Beyond that was a little cluttered room which darkened with the silent closing of the cloth. The man then moved his hand from Vivian's arm, crossing her back and onto her shoulder to stop her from walking further. He stood behind and pressed closely, pulling her head back onto his vest, arching her spine. He put his mouth on her jaw and breathed rapid and loud onto her face and neck while trying to unbutton the front of her dress. At the

same time his other hand slid the skirt up her thigh.

His noises were akin to beasts rutting in the wild, unashamed. She faced the small room, surrounded by boxes and crates of goods piled from floor to ceiling. Once her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she read markings with interest: salt, apples, tobacco, coffee and beets. The man between her and the door made progress with her buttons but her skirt kept getting in the way of his advance. Frustrated, he shoved her forward over a pile of large sugar sacks to fight her skirt with both hands.

In that moment, Vivian spun round and whispered, "Kiss me." She thought she heard angels singing as she thrust a fist full of hat pins in an upward direction between the buttons of his vest. He drew in one quick gasp. She saw his eyes. They were almost as wide as his gaping mouth. His thieving hands slid from her, letting the skirt fall to rest. As he exhaled, he looked down and touched the gaudy jewel-tipped weapons gently, before he buckled and fell. The man moaned for her and rolled his eyes before closing them sleepily.

Vivian stepped over his long legs strewn about the floor. Bending over his body, she retrieved the pins. One at a time, she pinched the slender shafts with a bit of his

shirt tail, pulling each lance through until the blood was pushed to the point. Surprisingly little. He proved stingy with even that.

Smoothing her hair calmly, Vivian then rebuttoned and straightened her dress before peering from behind the cloth curtain into the sales room. She could see the street clearly through the windows as well as her reflection. Studying her form, from across the room - from that distance - she could see no flaw.

She proceeded to empty the cash register. Greedily, she filled her bag with other items of jewelry from his display case, and topped that off with a handful of licorice drops. Exiting the shop, she left the "Closed" sign to bounce itself to rest against the glass door.

Vivian walked briskly to the train - with her chin held in the high air.

Chapter 18 - Rivers

Walt arrived home and again found that his wife had not prepared his supper. The night before, Walt had caged the rooster beneath his bed, but it managed to free itself and now sat where his supper should be. He noticed that one claw pinned a small blue paper to the table. It beckoned, resting only a few steps away. The visible corners of the note curled skyward, like a dying bug on its back. Walt nudged the rooster away to look over the paper. There were markings, but not made of curves and loops. This note bore mostly slashes, arranged so as to not mean nickels. He slipped the paper into his pocket to let it reveal its secrets to Jule.

Walt walked through the camp, trying not to make it obvious that he searched for his wife. Nearing Jule's tent, Walt saw Jennie stooped over their wood pile. Holding a saucer of milk, she quietly sang, "Here, kitty, kitty." Jule sat on a stump and acknowledged Walt's approach by jutting his graying chin whiskers upward with a grin. Walt had stopped some distance away, slid off his cap and lowered his head. Jule put his whittling down.

Jennie was stumped. "Where you 'spose my cat got off

to? Ain't seen her in days." Jule didn't answer as he moved to join Walt. Jennie called after him, "Ain't ya gonna help me find her?"

He waved her off, "Later." Jule neared Walt and stood in front of him, but not too close. Raising his brow a bit, he waited for his friend to speak.

Walt thought to tell Jule he should 'fess up about the red cat, but also figured he should stay in his own pew. He said, "Need a word, Jule."

Jule nodded once and then followed Walt who turned back down the lane. They heard Jennie call out angrily, "Supper's ready, Jule!" He held up his hand and waved again, without turning back to see her clenched expression - fists on hips.

When the men arrived at an intersection of lanes out of earshot from others, Walt stopped and ran his fingers over the little blue paper in his pocket. He quietly confessed, "I never took to school'n."

Jule turned his head and spit tobacco in the mud. "School'n ain't for ever'body no ways. Some folks' eyes is weak and others stir their letters." Walt was silent, so Jule continued. "Besides, if we's all booky men then who'd be buildin' this road? My people did lawyerin' and I was

meant for it. O`course, then the river flooded, and damned if I can't taste it still."

Walt retrieved the crinkled paper, holding it loosely in his palm as Jule spoke of the river. "Nothin' left for me in Pennsylvania now. If ya got a choice 'tween breathin' or not hearin' the screamin', ya take the breathin' - wantin' it bad, but all that fightin' to get it only lets the thunder in your ears. Thunder that don't stop." Jule scratched his stubbled neck thoughtfully. "Some say it sounds like a lion roarin' when comin' down a mountain uprootin' trees an' towns. But I ain't never heard a real lion. I doubt cougars is the same. I used to get a bounty for killin' a heap o' cougars in Canada, an' I can tell ya they don't roar none. Scream like a woman though."

Walt said his people called them Mountain Lions or Ghost Cats. Jule maintained his line of thought, "Anywho, a roarin' lion can be shot at. Not the river. A fella can shoot the river all day long an' it'll jus' laugh. Then when it feels up to washin' ya down its throat, only God can help ya. Sometimes He do, an' sometimes He don't. Ya think God might be like a river, Walt?"

Walt shrugged slightly, so Jule finished. "After

grabbin' a right friendly root I pulled myself up an' heard nothin' but birds. Never so glad to see sunshine. Then the stench come, sure 'nuff, makin' ya sorry for breathin' - but at least the screamin's done. That's when ya find yourself alone, cold and hungry, missin' your mama and needin' to feed yourself by workin' as a farm hand. An' I was damned happy t' be let to sleep in their barn an' eat their scraps - don't think I wasn't. I guess a river can make schoolin' and lawyerin' meant for other folk. Most honest work I ever done though. Farmin'."

Jule noticed the blue paper. He spit again and summed up, "Don't fret 'bout school none. Seems to me, the smarter folk get the meaner they get. I think it's 'cause climbin' higher makes ever'body else look like small critters scurry'n underfoot. Just natural I 'spose. Yessir, th' only people ever treated me like dirt's been fancy folk. And that's the God's sweet truth. Damned high-brows. Only small minded people need to step on others in order to stand taller. Why bother learnin' if it don't better a disposition? Makes educatin' unsuccessful at best."

Jule began to sneer, "School'd dandies - treatin' us like ants on a hill they think *they* made. Preacher says ya

gotta keep your heel pressed down on pride's throat lest it kicks wisdom out in th' cold - and it will - ever' day and twice on Sunday." Jule scratched his chin, "Might be fine to assume high ground if you pity folk underneath. But instead, booky people despise 'em. Don't know why. Despisin' gives a fella license to do the unthinkable, but pity makes ya wanna help. High and mightys could pity and help, couldn't they?"

Jule continued making his case. "O'course on the low end, people either get angry or go humble. The angry ones are negative, causin' trouble just like the despisers, but humble folk have no problem helping them above. They stay positive. Bit o' math is all that is. People just beneath me can pity the next one down, and they are all humble-happy to the one above. Or below them, wherever they's sittin'. Which means that ladder don't have no top or bottom. Stays kinda loose. I'd rather practice pity to stay near topside, and feel like a king. King of a small country named Jule. Nice place."

Jule inserted enough pauses to let Walt talk, but felt compelled to fill in that silence - knowing that some men, namely Walt, need to sneak up on sentences. Jule took his thumbs out of his pockets and crossed his arms, rocking on

his heels. Returning to the subject of enlightened people, he said, "I figure their head's so stuffed full o' books that their soul can't get 'nuff air. Heights can make men small. Some though. Not all. A few take care not to lose their way. I reckon the most smart ones are past the need for much air - 'cause their heart's helpin' with all their thinkin'. But that sort's terrible hard to find cause they don't make as much noise as the rest o' us." Jule rubbed his hand over his beard and looked toward heaven.

"Yessiree, God's got all knowin' an' He's in no need o' air."

Jule kept an eye on Walt and spit more tobacco.

"Wisdom ain't as interestin' as power. Damn shame is what that is. But ain't no shame in being poor. Some folks don't even know they're poor till they's told. Ain't that funny?"

Jule couldn't think of anything else to say while waiting on Walt to get tired of staring at the mud on his boots and speak, plus he figured he'd better spur Walt to speak up before the wind took the blue note. Jule nudged toward the little paper. "What ya got there?"

Walt moved the paper forward and Jule took it, turned it, smoothed it, held it further away, and then looked down

his nose at it. Squinting, he reported, "Sure 'nuff th' Sheriff's looking for ya. Told ya he was comin'." He looked to Walt for a reaction. There was none, except for a lowering of the eyes. "Says here he's wants ya to meet him in town at '*The Hankerin*'." Jule checked again, but Walt hadn't moved. Folding the paper, he held it toward Walt, who still wouldn't budge. Jule offered lightly, "Might not be so bad. Might be he's a happy drunk."

Walt slowly took the paper and slid it deep into his pocket. His voice shook, cracking so that he partly whispered. "Thanks."

Jule grabbed Walt's arm. "Hold on, now, Walt, what you gonna do? I been thinkin' on a plan, but nothin' works for you 'cept you say your woman is crazy."

"Your supper's waitin'."

"You know I didn't say a word to nobody."

Walt turned back sharply, "I know that."

Jule rubbed his hands through his hair roughly. Sighing, he confessed, "I have heard talk though. Some women goin' on 'bout how Vivian turned down help. Three babies is a mighty lot, yessir, and them women'd drop in on her with cookin' and all what they do. But Vivian held to not needin' help - out o' pride I reckon - so they let her

be. But then it's too quiet, see, and they all figure what I figured."

Walt dug at the ground with his boot. "She's not home."

Jule turned to look toward town. "I'll go with ya. He's probably got her."

Walt broke away quickly - heading toward his home.

Jule hurried to keep up, "Do we need the rifle?"

"If she packed her bag, she may have just run off."

"Damn it, Walt. I don't know how you stand that."

"She don't mean nothin' by it. She just likes them hotels. Wallpaper. Trolleys. Gas laid pipes. Frilly curtains."

Jule objected, "Which of 'em don't? They all don't leave though. What don't make no sense to me is, she don't really try. Never goes far enough to get away good."

"That's what I said - she don't mean nothin' by it."

"If it were me, I'd either buy her a long ticket and set her down on any train myself, or I'd keep her eyes black'd and swolled so shut she can't find the door in the first place."

Walt quickened his pace the closer he got to his tent. He threw the flap open and hurried inside. Flipping the

mattress high off the planks on which it rested, he saw beneath that her bag was missing, as well as some of her clothes. She left her sewing behind. Dropping the mattress, Walt was at the stove before the bedding fell back to rest. He wrapped his long arms around the cold pot belly of the stove and with a struggle was able to muscle it a few inches from its place. Jule offered to help, but Walt didn't answer and was soon digging the earth beneath. From that hole, he pulled a leather pouch, about the size of a hat. A quick glance inside satisfied. From his position on the ground, Walt scanned the area for any disturbed earth where she may have dug up other belongings. Nodding, his voice became firm. "She's on the train."

"How you figure?"

Walt handed his friend a depot schedule, marked with possible destinations. Both men were glad they didn't need to wrestle Vivian away from the Sheriff, as neither knew how to go about such a task - rifle or no. Jule sat at the table, sighing, holding his head. "Hate to say it, but considerin' her habits, Walt, she may have told the Sheriff you done it."

"You got her all wrong."

Jule didn't reply. After watching Walt sit on the

ground by the holes he dug, getting angrier with each tick of time, Jule offered, "Have supper with Jennie and me. Sheriff can wait. Nobody'll let him believe you done this. If he can't find ya till tomorrow, it'll give Vivian a chance to get herself elsewheres."

"She may not know to go - if she left 'fore he came lookin'."

"If I could find her, I'd go tell her, but I wouldn't know where to start. I 'spect you got a way of trackin' your own woman. Mind you, I wouldn't do it *for her*. I'm just sayin'. Ain't my row to hoe. But I'll help you."

Walt nodded and rose to his feet, swiping away mud stuck to his seat and knees. Clumps, large and small, shot about. Some tumbled from the few bits of furniture to find their way back to where they belonged. Others clung precariously, soiling high places.

Since the sun had just set, Walt lit the lantern and adjusted its wick, placing light at the middle of the table. Then he pulled the stub of a pencil from his shirt pocket. Setting it on the table in front of Jule, as well as the blue piece of paper - marked side down. He asked firmly, "Would ya put it down for me? Say, 'Babies fell. Sorry can't meet'."

Jule contorted his face disagreeably.

Walt shoved his leather pouch inside his shirt, and began stuffing clothing into his large denim barracks bag which he had kept after The Great War. His shaving kit was missing - and he couldn't find it the day before either, when he wanted to shave for Rena's funeral. Vivian had told him, "Ain't seen hide nor hair of it. What would I know o' your goods?"

Walt told Jule, "Leave the note for when that Sheriff comes back. When he leaves, you take the stove and bed, and this table, chairs..."

"You're as crazy as she is."

"I owe you." Walt handed his friend the scrap of browned paper with his tally of gambling losses. "We even?" Walt's tone changed suddenly after noticing no marks yet on the back of the blue paper. "Why ain't you been writin'?"

"Damn it, Walt." Jule groaned. He took the tally sheet, crumbled it into a ball and immediately pitched it at the stove. Walt watched it bounce and settle on the ground under Vivian's rocker. Standing, Jule declared clearly, "You don't owe me nothin'. Besides, how many times you think you can start over? Let her go."

Walt looked hard at his friend, then roughly dropped his knuckles onto the table top to punctuate his command. "Put the words down. I got to go."

Jule sighed deeply, and did write. He moaned the whole while, mumbling, "Speakin' outta turn ain't one o' my faults, Walt, but this frosts my cake." He then slid the message under a spoon.

Walt found a few turnips and a small bowl of pea pods. He stuffed his shirt with those, placed his canteen's strap over his head and let it drape across his chest. Then he topped his bag off with some bread in a handkerchief before pulling the bag's draw string cords tight. Jule saw the worn, faded name and serial number stenciled onto the bag, and knew Walt had planned after the war to be farther ahead than he ever actually managed to get - but he knew that was Vivian's fault. She kept him stepping back to square one.

Walt slung his bag over his shoulder and instructed, "Do what you want with all this. The hatchet is good and strong. The stove ain't as good as yours, but I 'spect you could sell it for quite a bit."

Jule's frustration worsened. "Ya gotta let her go, friend. She done put you through the ringer more'n any man deserves."

"Don't talk like you know her."

"You're quittin' your job to chase a woman that shouldn't be given another thought."

"Chasin' her? You think that's what I'm doin'?"

"She ain't worth it!"

Walt's fist found Jule's jaw before he knew his arm was moving. Jule stumbled backwards and spun a quarter turn, then rubbed his jaw and studied Walt. Those eyes again, just sad and scared, and maybe a bit sorry, too. Still, they both knew a sore jaw was the only proper response to an insult against a man's wife.

Walt dropped his shoulders low. "She's my wife. And she gets lonely out there."

Jule laughed a little, "Does she?" He took a few steps backward to be out of reach.

Walt figured if he didn't take care of his family then he'd be worse than an infidel. He also wondered what else he could have done to take care of his babies, so they'd still be alive. Accidents happen though - it wasn't like he left his family to fend for themselves and probably starve, as many other men had.

"That's how she tells it. She might be in trouble. I gotta go get her. But it may take awhile to get her

willin' - she puts up a bit of a fuss for show."

"Why not just knock her like ya did me an' drag her back 'fore ya miss too much work?"

"Jule," Walt spoke softly, "I ought to be able to turn her heart. Change her mind." Walt knew Jule never hit Jennie. Although he was tempted on a regular basis, Walt and Jule were higher than that. Beating a woman is what any savage beast would do.

Jule took in a long breath. He pleaded, "So much fuss. Have supper with us."

Walt shook his head and then looked directly at Jule, nodded once to say good-bye, and quickly left without looking back. Already dark. He wanted to get across the field to the train station, unnoticed, but felt eyes on him no matter which way he turned.

Jule blew out the lamp and sprinted through the camp lanes. He caught up to Walt. "Ya got no quit in ya, Walt. I'll go ahead and fend off that Sheriff. Maybe get him into a card game." He bounded forward until he could face Walt, then walked fast backwards as his friend pressed forward. Jule looked square into Walt's eyes and finalized their arrangement. "Your debt comes to only that rocker. Jennie's always havin' babies so I'll take it with me

tonight. That'll help smooth her over - she should be right mad by th' time I get home. Plus she's been raggin' 'bout that damned red cat. She'll like the rocker."

The air was sharp on their faces and they could see their breath swirl and disappear. Weeds beneath their feet crunched, not merely from winter death, but from ice which entombed each stick and old bloom. Another storm would certainly come.

Jule regained his serious tone and promised, "I will hold the rest o' your house and we'll set it right when you get back. I'm not one to welch out of a deal. Stay gone for a good spell though, ya hear? The road'll be far north o' Torrington by then. You're strong as an ox, so Boss'll take ya back, sure 'nuff." He turned and ran a few lengths, but then left Walt with a few parting words. "By the bye, I'll bet ya a nickle you're back 'fore the first flower!" As Jule disappeared into the night through the field toward town, he grinned, knowing full well he would lose that bet. He even thought he would never see Walt again, but hoped he would find peace.

Walt was proud to have such a friend, and felt thoroughly glad Jule hadn't gotten enough school to make him lose his way. Beneath the flickering stars, and

between the lights of the town and that of the camp, Walt wanted desperately to take only a moment and pass by the fork, but there was no time. Vivian needed him.

Chapter 19 - Monuments

Walt found the train depot by way of alleys, successfully avoiding the main street where *The Hankerin'* sounded jiggy. It always had plenty of activity overflowing into the street each evening. Walt watched from the shadows. Its windows glowed brightly, illuminating steam and smoke billowing out of bodies and the doorway. Music and laughter. He saw Jule there, staring through a window with his hands in his pockets, no doubt eyeing the Sheriff as promised, and the card games as well.

The work on the road would not be missed. Walt was plenty tired of throwing down a pickaxe. Tired of the raking, shoveling, scraping, leveling, and especially tired of the blasting. Tired of the hours, the low pay, the heat and the cold. They used a few trucks and mules plus a steam engine, but the men's backs were the tools used-up the most. Walt didn't expect he'd find a different line of work other than what called for his back. At least he had that.

At the depot, Walt showed a heart shaped locket to the serious man behind the counter. Vivian had ripped it from

her neck years before, and thrown it into the Kaw River. The chain cut deeply into her flesh but she had not bled. Walt couldn't remember what she was angry about, but knew the long, slender bruise left on her neck stayed for several months. She proudly wore that purple necklace on the left side of her throat, and studied its progress curiously as it turned brown, yellow and green, until finally disappearing.

The locket held their wedding picture. He had gifted that locket on their first anniversary - but it rested in Walt's pocket by their second. First he had to retrieve it out of the river. No easy task. It was a miracle he found it sparkling on a piece of deadwood swirling in circles amongst some rocks, preventing it from floating downstream or sinking into the muck. With the locket in his grasp, he was near drowned but crawled onto the river bank and rested in Vivian's muddy shadow. At that time, Walt was still hopeful regarding his wife. He couldn't decide if she just wanted to hurt him or was testing his love. Yes, he would jump into a raging river and fetch her discarded jewelry. He said it wouldn't take much to repair the chain, but she shrugged and let her fists drop from her hips. As her shadow left him to dry in the sun, she scowled, "Don't

bother." He never did make repairs, and she never asked.

The serious teller pulled glasses from his vest pocket. He dragged the chain across the counter while moving his arm far and near, trying to get a good look at the photograph. "Earlier this morning. Got her hair shortened since this picture though." The man looked slyly above his small, round glasses at Walt, and smiled. "Friendly gal. Headed to Denver. Says she aches all over, and needs to slip into some therapeutic mineral vapors." He chuckled, "Also said she's got a husband there who misses her terribly. I guess I understand her smirk now."

Walt understood also. She wanted tellers to notice and remember her, then point him in the right direction. Yes, he would track and fetch her home again. Yes, he would both be hurt and pass any test, but his hope of changing her wore thin. He bought a ticket south, and the teller also slid him a note with the name of the town where people go bathe their aches away. Walt hesitated, trying to decide whether he would ask the teller to read it for him, or whether or not to just lie about having lost his glasses. The teller saw that Walt held the note upside down. He flicked it and said: "What you do in Denver, friend, is buy a westward ticket - to Glenwood Springs. I

expect you got aches that could use some soakin' in them hot springs, too."

Trains came through nearly every hour, but three quarters were for freight. With more roads being built, the train depots weren't as busy as they once were. While Walt waited for the next passenger train, a woman with wide eyes hurried in and startled the teller. "Silas! You'll never believe it. Some devilment's upon us. It's Otto - he's gone. Closed his shop early this morning and nobody knew why, but he's, well-," she whispered, "well, he's dead. Dead most of the day, doc says. Irma Jean found him. Cleaned out most of his shop, too! Took near ever'thing."

They continued speaking with hushed urgency, and hurried toward the street. Silas shouted to a back room, "Grady! Man my post." Silas sprinted out of the depot and down the boardwalks to join the commotion. The woman scurried close behind. Walt felt this was good news - at least for him - as the Sheriff would busy himself down the street.

The teller's assistant, Grady, took advantage of his boss' absence to whisper to Walt, "That woman didn't go south to Denver. Don't mean to cause you no grief, sir -

and I could lose my position here for saying - but there were unfitting flirtations exchanged for fare. Not outright favors, mind you, just highly improper. She went east. Let me exchange that ticket for you, if you still want to find her."

The assistant nervously watched the street windows while working the register. "I don't know why he steered you wrong - she made it clear she was headed for Richmond. Said it several times. Please, mister, pretend to get on the train for Denver, and then hide somewhere to wait a few hours for the next eastbound. I need this work." Walt agreed, and thanked the frightened young man.

After the southbound rolled out, Walt waited in an alley between crates, out of eyeshot from the street or the platform. A warm place to soak his aching bones sounded mighty good, but east was where he needed to go. He had heard of the place that the teller recommended, but had never been. Some of his fellow workers at the time had, though, and spoke quite highly of the stunning canyon leading into that valley - where Indians fought wars over the sacred waters. The most victorious tribe ultimately won though, and the losers relocated so that a hotel could be built to relieve Presidents and Europeans who visited

the pool with pains of their own. As the preacher said, progress will not be stopped.

Walt's friends told him of the thick water, heated naturally. A calming place. At the time, that group of men worked with Walt in the mountains at a quarry. Eight thousand feet high, full of pine and scattered clusters of aspen trees turning gold to announce the coming snow. A little town bustled there, but had seen better days. The graveyard was the prettiest around. The dead had marble headstones - not a one of them wooden to rot with time. Scrap marble blocks lined the river bank, purposely deposited there to keep the railroad from washing. The beauty of those blocks rivaled the Crystal River itself, curving this way and that along the tracks.

Walt worked alongside skilled marble cutters - mostly Italians. Some men scratched their names into the quarry face, but the scaffolding moved, as did the stone when cut and hauled to the mill. Walt's primary job was keeping the pick-up truck running. Driving that road proved almost as dicey as work on the quarry itself. The road could get slick as snot and often crossed paths with the white death: avalanches.

More than once, men were buried in their work. One

man in particular had been cut nearly in half when a huge block fell on him. Even a small block of marble could do severe damage, but this one crushed his lower parts, from the belly down. It dammed up all his life into his chest. He had a long lettered name that nobody could pronounce so the men called him Ivan and said he was from Russia, although he was from a smaller country next door to Russia. He was still alive and talking, but felt no pain. They brought his wife in from the town to say good-bye, and then they had to lift the marble. That's when he died. Ivan finally whispered, "Time to go. Let me sleep."

The sight of him - half alive and half dead - brought men to their knees. Women wailed into their hands, relieved when he finally died. As a boy, Walt came across a squirrel in the road, half smashed just like the man in the quarry. It had big bulging eyes, more fearful than the man's - but it didn't make a sound. Amazingly, it could scramble away rather quickly in that condition - and left no trail of blood. The front paws clawed into the dirt as it dragged itself to the gutter, keeping his panic filled eyes on Walt - as if he was the cause, or could help.

Walt did try to help. He got a stick and poked at the squirrel, thinking he could kill it - put it out of its

misery. But he was just a small boy, and it would take much more effort to kill. Walt felt worse than before, having frightened the animal even worse. He walked away, confident that something would come along and eat the smashed squirrel soon enough and end the suffering of all concerned.

Watching the man in the quarry and hearing him relate that he didn't feel pain made Walt feel better about leaving the squirrel that day. Since then, he often wondered why he caused himself so much misery fretting over so many things out of his control. He also questioned whether the squirrel knew it was half dead or thought it was still fully alive, although at a bit of a disadvantage. The man in the quarry knew, and had time to contemplate. The knowing part of him was more alive than it'd ever been to that point. There was no comfort for his woman though.

The truck Walt tinkered with - and held together with wire, ropes and prayers - had a crane, but not as big as those used in the cities to build skyscrapers. Like a forest of steel, a city could have hundreds of them, maybe twenty stories high. They made a man feel like an ant - unless he owned one. They were dangerous, too. Hundreds of workers, mostly women and children, burned to death in

those fire traps. Helpless people stood on the street, listening to the screams, hearing them echo vividly in their memory for years afterward.

Walt didn't want to think about the buildings growing taller, but had heard rumors that it was happening, and the wind did not knock them over. Cathedrals to worship money. A new flick called King Kong was showing, about an ape climbing a hundred stories into the clouds - but Walt knew it was all make-believe. Perhaps Vivian would care to see it when he found her.

Preferring real trees and stone to steel, Walt missed his work in the mountains. There, the quarry boss regularly came out of his little office to encourage the men - and keep their spirits high. He bellowed from deep inside a warm belly. "You're not diggin' a pit, boys - you're buildin' monuments! We got the finest quality marble anywhere in the world - 99.5% pure white. Fact is, we cut the largest block o' marble ever quarried and shipped it all the way to Washington - fifty-six tons it was - whittled down fancy for one of our Great War dead to rest in honored glory. Not just any ol' box for him, no sirree. A fine marbled tomb for somebody - God alone knows his name." His voice trailed off quietly, "Many of you

knew plenty of 'em fallin' in the trenches."

Boss regained his composure and yelled, "This marble ends up as municipal buildin's - beautifyin' cities from New York to San Francisco to Chicago and back again."

Men who had heard the pep talk many times chuckled and mouthed the words along with Boss. "Why, in Denver they built a Postal Station lookin' good enough to be a church!" Boss stood on a piece of marble shaped like a wheel, laying on its side, bigger than his fancy car. He pointed down to it and explained, "Trains took drums just like this one all the way to Washington where them ol' boys made a giant statue of our dear departed President Lincoln. Fellas just like you cut these column pieces to hold up ol' Lincoln's house - and he is lookin' at your work all damned night and day forever. Don't you ever forget that, men." Boss jabbed a finger at the group of them and shouted, "Never - and I mean never - think you're doin' somethin' that don't matter! Now put your backs into it! We're buildin' monuments!" The men watched Boss light a cigar and stroll back to his place where he hid from the weather.

Walt deeply wished that Vivian had gone to the mountains, but believed she went east. His train whistled and Walt was relieved to be out of the cold. He was afraid

he'd fall asleep and ride too far, even though the train exhaled loudly at each stop. The metal on metal screeched horribly, ending the comfortable clack-clacketty-clack. Still, he paid the Porter to wake him when they neared towns. He wanted to look them over, to spy what Vivian would see through the window - something of interest to make her stop before Richmond. This is what Walt expected from experience.

One time he chased her east through Cheyenne when they were having their Frontier Parade. Cowboys and Indians on horses shot it out in the streets with dummy ammunition, and women were outfitted like old timey saloon dancers. There were marksmen, rope tricks and trick riders. They also had dressed up wagons hauling raucous reenactments through the streets - of gamblers, shootouts, rustlers, miners, drunken scalpings and the lynching of several Orientals for being strange. Walt knew she'd stop to watch the parade - especially if there were a rodeo, firecrackers and cockfights after. She liked to get lost inside a crowd of flag wavers. Still, it was hell to find her that day. He tried to get a feel for the places she passed through, and see from the same tracks what she might find irresistible in a town. But it was nighttime, and he'd

worked all day.

Walt passed other passengers settled in their seats, resting their heads on each other's shoulders or upon their baggage propped against cold windows. Walt's bag sat in the empty seat next to him. He'd be able to tell if anyone tried to mess with it - and it provided a place to rest his head. He slunk comfortably low in his seat and covered his eyes with his cap. The train plowed snow, making its own private storm as a white cloud rose from the ground to smack those flakes falling from the sky.

As Walt thought of his family, he felt one day he would paint their portrait - the way it should have been. Vivian in a fine house, next to a lamp full of oil on a table by a brick hearth - with plenty of wood and a warm fire. A faithful old hound dog at her feet. Plenty of sewing by her side, love in her eyes, and kindness on her lips. His children would be healthy and happy, playing in the foreground of the scene. The table would be set with breakable dishes - no more tins. Also, a pantry full of supplies would fill the further shadows of the room. While the movement of the train rocked Walt to sleep, he softly spoke the names: Ruth, Ruby and Roy. Then, more quietly, he added: Vivian.

Chapter 20 - The Hunt

A sense of relief washed over Vivian as she got off the train in a new town. It wasn't the first time she'd left Walt. She had the wanderlust, and nothing could be done. Maybe there'd be a tonic for it one day. When Vivian ran Walt became a worried shepherd searching for his lost lamb. He always seemed able to find her, and predictably he'd harness her for safety. She imagined him petting his pet while scolding the bad behavior, but Walt never said much. He just took her home. Perhaps this time she'd dig her heels in a bit. She had to admit, though, that this time might be different. Not only did she have the Castle Bob hair cut and a brassiere full of cash, but Walt would be busy with that Torrington Sheriff. She could stay lost longer. Still, he would come.

Men eyed Vivian at the stations, both when boarding and debarking. They tipped their hats with polite nods and smiles. They were gentlemen with proper suits, brushed hats and clean boots. She returned their smiles sweetly, but wanted to sit alone on the train to eat licorice privately. Vivian did a double take at a man on the platform before her train rolled away from Walt. She saw

the familiar figure out of the corner of her eye, simply standing there looking at her through the train window. It was the Reverend John, slowly cocking his head to the side. Expressionless, he stared at her, then finally tipped his hat as the train pulled forward. Vivian was quite uncomfortable about that for some time. He didn't try to thump her with his Bible, but then he couldn't have known she was leaving her husband. He also didn't know about the dead thief in the hockshop. Did he know she was from the crowd at the camp? Why he fixed his sights on her in such an odd fashion - Vivian couldn't say. Perhaps he sensed something wasn't altogether right, but couldn't figure out what. Perhaps he saw it all. No matter, she thought - shaking off the discomfort. She was far away from him now.

A few little whistle stops raced past her window since then. Distant objects seemed to stand still, while the grass nearest the tracks past by in a blink. She flew as the wind. The first big town that came into her sights was where Vivian stepped off the train - nowhere near Richmond. If she couldn't make more money, she would try to spend all she had in the little time available until Walt would come and take her home.

Some of the women she saw wore pleated skirts, even to

their knee. Hemlines were always rising. A few women smoked. Many men wore sandy colored hats and black bands. It was a town where the streets juggled more motorcars than wagons. There would be a motion picture theatre, and roller skating rink. There'd be lodges for dancing, where people drink to get soused or go to just visit with others. Most homes had radios, wallpaper, and lights. Even street lights were stuck in sidewalks taming the mud - all the comforts Vivian remembered. This was a proper town, full of people who might tip their hats but who don't bother to expect seeing you come Sunday. They never expect to see you again at all.

Vivian waited for night. The moon brings out hunters. Vivian needed to prepare herself. She stopped at a hosier before paying for a room, and shopped also for shimmering baubles that a proper adventure required. Knowing the methods of trapping, Vivian understood certain rules one must follow to win. She placed the desired scent on her wrists, ears and thighs for optimal allure. Camouflage is essential, so she skillfully painted her eyes and lips, and wore a little lace. Wrapping several shiny trappings around her neck, she let them fall into the valley of her breasts - the contoured landscape where her prey would

stumble and fall. A few of the same sparkling danglers hung from her ears like fishing lures, attracting the hungry to bite and be hooked. She twisted and turned in a struggle to zip up the hookless by herself, but the dress fit like a glove. It was then that she missed her long hair that could be twirled into pleasing, springy curls, to bounce as she moved. But her hair was bobbed - and for that she again hated Rena. Nothing could be done but make the best of the situation. Once ready, Vivian looked into the glass and sighed with satisfaction. Walt would certainly be upset if he saw her.

The mating call is a whispered song. Humming a tune, she left her lair to sniff out the herd. The weak would be sitting on benches, leaning against doorways and walls, having a smoke or playing dice in alleys. Depending on the terrain, she might simply wait for an easy target to cross her path unaware.

Pursuit by moonlight is best to achieve the proper deception, and that is the time when most predators prey on unsuspecting souls - the weak who can't find happiness in good light, so they wander the night. Playing the role of bait is deliciously dangerous. There are so many tricks in a hunter's bag. She might fumble with too many packages,

or feign a swoon. Any weakness works, such as a slight tumble producing a sore ankle - or broken-hearted tears. A smiling hero comes to the aid of decoys, marching himself to ruin. If those strategies fail, there are plenty of others, but she rarely needed to use all the weaponry in her arsenal.

It was easy enough to follow the tracks and learn where they drink. Eventually, they all gather there, although flushing them out took cunning. The hunt got more difficult with each passing year. There were usually many other predators in the area, all vying for the same game. As Vivian aged, the field became littered with competitors - younger and more fit for the chase. Still, there was enough for all. Vivian hunted the hunters and trapped the trappers, and had never known any who fought. Once a big one was bagged, she devoured his value by the fire, down to the last cent. During this natural process, the prey might thrash a bit, but afterward was grateful, innately understanding his purpose.

The evening air soon full of tobacco smoke wafted by Vivian's powdered nose. She strolled slowly, catching every knowing eye. Passing places overflowing with loud lively music, she noted their location and would return

there if she failed in finer establishments. Soon, she found a perfect café with thin, young waiters wearing clean aprons, stylish little mustaches and slicked hair. Fine linen cloths rested beneath wine bottles and prettily presented meals. Violins sang behind fashionable backs as gentlemen sipped and sighed.

Vivian chose that doorway to perch, waiting with the patience of a raptor. She listened, hearing a disagreeable rancher wrestling with his coat. Apparently, he had twisted his knee when a snake spooked his horse. Here, the snake was repeatedly cursed anew. The man's friend tried to quiet him, and coax him to a doctor. The rancher feared all saw-bones, but his friend insisted, "It's going to fester, George, now be reasonable."

"Reason never cured nobody o' nothin'."

"You dumb ox, George. You say what you don't mean."

"I don't say nothin' what I don't never mean."

"Negation." A voice intruded from behind a column, explaining to the rancher, "Excuse me, sir, but your friend means you negate. However, you actually used multiple negatives, actually accomplishing your intention. The sum ultimately corrects - regardless of superfluties."

"Error?"

"He means you're wrong," said the friend.

"I know what he means. Sez who?"

"Forgive me, but you intimidated that reason is useless. Highly debatable."

The friend inserted, "He said it does cure, but that's not what he meant."

"No, no, the math is clear."

The rancher sputtered, "Math? Listen, mister, my friend can tell me I don't know nothin' nohows, but you can't start confusin' matters with no math. 'Sides, we're talkin' 'bout my leg and my mouth and all I see 'bout to add up is your teeth on the floor." He turned to his friend and mumbled, "Starchy stranger come here tellin' me I'm wrong."

The friend spat on the floor in the man's direction before bracing George's bad side like a crutch. As they managed to hobble out, the friend whispered, "That starchy 'fancy pants' was actually disagreeing with me more than you, George."

"Don't give it no nevermind."

Vivian enjoyed the spectacle, and breathed in the fancy man's aroma. He smelled of opportunity. The stranger returned to his newspaper, muttering insults, most

probably, in Latin. Vivian caught the gist. She felt, though, that he was too sophisticated to trap tonight. She would require smaller prey and use her earnings to buy crisper clothing. She would shed the shiny lures, and secure a book from a library - or perhaps a chess board. Then she would return tomorrow, looking for a schooled man to teach her the game - and finagle him out of his money.

Still, Vivian didn't like the dandy. Her thoughts flashed to Walt, who wouldn't know the difference between Latin and snoring, but who treated her like she could walk on water. A bolt of guilt struck her, but passed. She hated it when that happened. How dare he - she blamed the highfalutin stranger for flaunting his manners like everybody else was ill-bred. Clay is sometimes shaped for common use and sometimes for great. The potter's whim. Not Walt's fault. Still, she knew the dandy was right, and didn't mean any harm, but when two friends can understand each other, they should be let be.

While Vivian tried to think of something poetic to do to the dandy, she spied three others approach in the street. She tipped her chin slightly, and then fell with a pitiable little-girl whimper. She pressed the splinter deeper into her palm to make her wince effectively. The

men could not have been more sympathetic. One checked her lower leg for a broken bone, asking first, "May I, Miss?" A quite spherical man offered to drive her home, and the third fretted that she be escorted to a doctor. They lifted her to the other foot and helped her to a bench outside the café. There, she lowered her head, dotting her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief.

She saw that the strange dandy studied her activity from the window, scanning the scene curiously above his newspaper. She turned her face quickly - but realized he might recognize her tomorrow. On second thought, that might make it easier. Still, she didn't like being peeped at through a window.

All three doting gentlemen wore suits of equal quality and their shoes were new. She had trouble choosing among the three as only the eldest gentleman bore a wedding ring - but that didn't mean they're not all married. Sometimes taken men were easier to snare, but his social status and the possibly higher virtue that often comes with age must be taken into account. That balance was weighed against her own age. At least she needn't worry about her ever declining wardrobe, for the pawnshop thief had paid for a new dress earlier that morning. Vivian quickly decided to

wait and watch for whichever man bit first. She would pounce ever so smoothly on the slightest hint of interest beyond their initial duty of aiding a fallen lady.

The one with a gap between his teeth and lovely brown eyes maneuvered himself in front of the youngest man. He managed to gain the more advantageous position of kneeling at Vivian's feet while holding her hands. He brushed his forearms lightly across her knees. The raptor took note of his tie clip and cuff links. This is the one she would devour tonight and leave his bones to bleach in the morning sun. She would throw him out wanting more, but would threaten to bring charges - and there, he would offer her the world. When Walt arrived, he would see the bounty she collected and demand an explanation with simply a look, but she would say nothing - and with that, Walt would be devoured as dessert.

"May I ask you to please see me to my hotel?"

"Certainly, I'd be honored - Miss..?"

Vivian only smiled and did not respond. The air became noticeably sharper as he steadied her tightly with one arm behind her waist and the other holding her hand. He introduced himself as Dr. David Hawk. Vivian couldn't resist such a delightful bit of treachery being handed her

on a platter. She nearly laughed while remarking, "Didn't the elder gentleman in your party call you Dale earlier?"

The man confessed, "He may have, yes. That's my other name." He saw her amusement and continued. "You see, some men change their ways, but I change my name as I see fit."

Vivian laughed, and that surprised her. She'd gone years without laughing, and now she'd done it twice within a span of half a week - both for the misdeeds of scandalous men.

"Tonight I feel like a doctor. Dr. David Hawk."

"That's the name of a bird of prey."

"You musn't worry. Once your leg is properly attended, I may be Russell McAlter, and later in the week perhaps Phillip Eagleton. It doesn't hurt anyone. Haven't you ever wanted to be someone else for a time?"

Vivian didn't answer, but knew she liked the rascal. "You're playing games to cheer me. Who are you truly?"

"I am every one of my names. And I certainly would like to cheer you. We should get to know each other so well that you learn all my names and match them to my temperament of the day. I'll be honest, though, and warn you that one of my personalities does not wish to be known. And it's just as well, you see, because he's a liar."

Vivian shook with delight. He reminded her of Lewis, her sailor.

"You should try it some time. It's easier than changing your mind. I would never try that. Well, of course, perhaps I would - for you."

Vivian knew she would have to be careful with this one. His charm had a stinger. A prowler like herself. The doctor whispered close to her ear that they should celebrate the end of the Noble Experiment of temperance even though there were still a few dry counties. The bite of dust storms could be washed down.

Vivian would not be drinking, but didn't tell the doctor. When she drank too much she thought she saw the ogre everywhere and heard him laughing while crunching bones. She hoped the doctor would carry her up the stairs of the hotel. She mentioned that the steps would prove particularly difficult since her ankle demanded she use the other foot only. Either he was no gentleman at all, or he surmised her fraud. In the friendliest way, the gentleman steadied her as she hopped. He watched her bosom make promises, bouncing all the way to the second floor landing.

Inside her room, the hawk helped her to the bed. As he began to remove his arms from around her waist, she ran

her hand along his arm and held his hand, pulling his fingers toward her lips for a kiss of gratitude. He knelt and offered quietly as a matter of protocol: "Forgive me for being forward, miss, but perhaps you shouldn't be alone tonight." If Vivian hadn't been certain the man was game before, she now was, and it made him more deserving of his coming fate. She imagined how surprised, and perhaps how pleased, he would be the moment he learned she was not so easily taken. Then he would feel regret. It was he who stepped eagerly into a deadly snare. She would not prolong his fate.

At the moment of her musings, his two friends appeared in the doorway mentioning the time and the theater. Obviously his companions did not realize they should go on without him. He seemed flustered, but obeyed their stern expressions. Hesitating, he kissed Vivian's hand and then apologized before saying goodnight. "You certainly are a temptation. But I have a prior commitment." Vivian tried to look as pitiful as she could, but he closed the door slowly and quietly, with a wink. Certainly he would think of her throughout the evening and perhaps return to her later - alone.

In the meantime, Vivian reasoned, she might as well

continue the hunt and would perhaps fare better than expected, with double earnings. When she saw from her window that they were out of sight, she bounded down the steps and once again entered the street. Shuddering against the sudden cold, Vivian focused on a few delicate snowflakes floating past. She drew her arms in tightly and rubbed them. A horrid thought whispered its evil. If she were younger the doctor would have fought harder. No, the others must have a hold on him - perhaps related to his wife. A harsh shiver pierced through her body and the gentle pieces of lacy snow chased her back inside the hotel doors. She returned to her room to await the doctor's late night house-call.

She called these men gentlemen, but knew that it wasn't money that made them exceptional. It was manners that made gentle men. She knew that only the word "lady" was more misused.

Vivian waited a reasonable amount of time for the doctor, and figured he had wisely decided to cut his losses and escape. Being a fellow hunter, he must have sensed that her hunger pangs craved something more tangible than his. Of course she would not allow events to reach the point of adultery. That would be wrong - and she

continually tried her best to save herself for Lewis. Vivian simply wanted the dear doctor in a compromising position and make him pay. But the hawk didn't have such scruples - and would have taken her virtues and anything else he could get away with, compelling her to kill him. Again, Vivian refused to entertain the thought that her age had anything to do with the man's retreat. He was still a man after all.

If men behaved fairly, Vivian always behaved fairly in return. The honest and upright should remain untroubled in this life - but others enter into a dark bargain with the world. And a deal's a deal. Vivian felt dismayed at the number of those willing to break the contract of their marriage. She often felt that if wives learned to complain with sharp objects to punctuate their point, husbands would be better behaved.

Getting dozy, Vivian put the trappings back into her bag, and washed away the camouflage. Fond thoughts of sweet trophies filled her mind, stuffed and mounted. She smiled for the legendary ones that got away. The raptor ran her talons through her hair before curling up in a warm feathery nest for the night. She would satisfy her hunger the following night.

Part III

"...any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any romance, however passionate."

W. H. Auden

Chapter 21 - The Rooster

Walt dreamed his usual dreams - more unsettling than anything else. He was always a child in these nightmares - seemingly helpless, but strong inside where it mattered. He was about nine years old, but his father told Boss he was older - not as sickly as he looked. Coal dust covered the land like black snow, ankle deep or more, which made walking difficult and dirty. Walt managed the mule that dragged timber down into the mine for shoring up roofs. Some men had small lights affixed to their caps, while others still had flames flickering in front of a flash plate, resting atop small tin oil reservoirs strapped to their hat bands.

Regulations existed, but they changed often or were overlooked to keep production numbers up. If men complained about the conditions they were promptly replaced. Young Walter had no light, but all the workers, young and old, those who saved enough money for cap lanterns and those who drank their pay, all breathed black air in and out of their lungs. The pit ponies did as well. Walt learned to sneak bites of his lunch while working so he could finish before it was stolen by men who threatened

to bury him under an accident if he talked.

The stomping of the mule's hoof, in combination with the rhythm of men coughing and clanking their metal canteens beating against matching lunch buckets, always signaled a change in the dream. Walt looked deep into the big round tired eye of one of the mules. Its long lashes dropped heavily like a black curtain over darker water. Clanking sounds then became a melody of his mother's screams and his father's laughter, harmonizing together as he sat her down on a bed of hot coals. She had offended him somehow - an easy thing to do. But the boy never knew the subtleties of her slight gestures, hesitations or sighs. He never knew what terrible transgression she had performed to warrant her husband's accusations and the wages for such sins.

Walt's father assured his son that she deserved all she had coming to her. The old man certainly seemed to enjoy her wild kicking, clawing, hair pulling and begging as she tried to escape the hot coals - or whatever other punishment he thought just. The laughter took on an earthy beat, and her screams reach a crescendo that disappeared into lofty heights. Walt closed his big eyes also - faster than the mule had - and kept them closed as he covered his

ears and hid. Only the godlike could bear such music and live.

One person could always bring out the old man's soft side, and that was Walt's Aunt Roxy. When Walt's father was young, he threw Roxy over a stair railing into the basement, which put her in a wheelchair for life. He always felt bad that he broke her back - and that one sentiment was the only evidence that the old man had a heart. This one bit of regret was enough to keep people hoping, keep giving him chances, even though he regularly disappointed.

Walt picked flowers for Roxy. She petted him, smoothing his hair. He told her he would build a tree house for her one day. It would have a lift with railings and a gate. Pulleys would be employed to take her up like an elevator or even a hot air balloon where she could go to faraway lands - even up to Heaven - wherever she wished.

The dream slowed as Walt saw Roxy dying, shrinking into her chair, while he told her the wonders they would see. She smiled as her face shriveled. She managed to whisper about promises being binding. Her flowers withered and fell to the floor as she was wheeled away.

Walt would then find himself under his bed, looking at

his father's watch, listening to it tick. He often hid from anger. The bed would always shake and lift to disappear with a loud gasp as the old man stood over his son, holding a belt in one hand. He snatched the watch away with the other. Walt's arm would ache, being dragged from the home to the yard for his whipping. His father always insisted that he be buried with that watch. "If you want it you'll have to take it off my cold, stinkin' rot - if you're man enough for it." He gave two options: either dig him up in the night to take the watch like a coward; or take it from him at the funeral in front of his mother, God, and everyone else - so that they all would know he's a little thief.

In the dream, the belt thrashing was always averted by Walt's grandfather, gently taking his hand and walking him calmly into the woods. With his grandfather, Walt was safe. When he looked back, he saw the angry father raise a fist, with the watch attached.

Walking with a cane, and always kind, his grandfather never regretted giving his daughter to a man who became a beast - as his mother often mentioned. It was a devilish yet sure transformation which occurred calmly in the dream - either sitting near the fire, or stretching his legs

after a meal. Walt's father would turn, sure enough.

Vivian appeared, sitting with them in Walt's old family home, which is where most of his dreams occurred. Even though Vivian never had been to that house, nor ever met his parents, there she sat - an adult, even though Walt was still a child in the dream. He knew she didn't belong there, but it didn't stop her. She let Walt sit on her lap while she whispered words into his ear that he could not hear, but his father could - and it always made the old man laugh.

Walt's mother stayed busy at the stove, and his father seemed older than his grandfather. He had become the giant rooster, strutting, scratching the floor with razor sharp claws. Vivian stroked and shined his beak, while the brilliantly colored cock crowed. His tall red comb swayed and brushed against the rafters when he tilted his head to keep a cocked eye on Walt.

At the stove, the rooster's wife took care to avoid the beast's tail feathers arched like sickles, which had thoughtlessly cut her before. Vivian whispered and laughed with the rooster, while looking down her nose at Walt. She didn't let him leave and go to his mother's side. Tugging at him, she forced him back to her lap as he struggled.

Walt closed his eyes, making the room become a blackened hole - another mine. This one lay further west, when hunger and dust visited every home, forcing people to move or starve. Walt's father took him and his older brother, Burr, into an abandoned mine to steal coal - and then trade with farmers for vegetables. They pulled the pillars in the mine, which were not made of wooden beams raised in the east where forests were plentiful. Here, the miners had sculpted pillars by hacking and hauling away all that was not pillar. These solid columns of coal held the roof - which also consisted of nothing but solid coal. It took some doing to get them loosed, and the team took care not to remove all. Risky nonetheless.

Suddenly, a huge slab of coal sloughed off the side of a wall and smashed Walt's father, trapping him beneath his treasure. The old man's dead eyes criticized Walt as the boys struggled to release him and drag his body out of the mine. They should have taken a rat with them to sense the danger. A canary will die of poison gas to warn the men, but rats will run before a cave-in.

When the accident involving his father had occurred in truth, Walt was a grown man engaged to be married - but always stayed a small sickly boy in the dream. He could

never go back into the mine after that. And his brother didn't belong there anyway. He only appeared in the dream to help Walt.

Burr wore the army uniform from the Great War that he wore for his burial. He had survived the trenches, vicious rats, mustard gas, and whatever else the Kaiser could throw at him. He came home with only shrapnel, shell shock and foot rot, which claimed a few of his toes. But he came home - only for the Spanish Influenza to take him shortly after, like many millions of others.

That's what most families got for Christmas that year. They either suffocated from their own fluids, or watched helplessly as bodies accumulated. Doctors were surprised, casket makers overwhelmed, and grave diggers could not dig fast enough to satisfy the demand. People stayed home from work, school, and even from church for the few months of the epidemic. Of course, it was worse in summertime, and took more souls in one year than the Black Plague had done in four. Such an ironic tragedy that someone would survive a war, only to be killed by a street corner sneeze coming from a lovely pixie-faced seller of flowers - who died later that night.

In times like those, people often only appeared dead.

Walt hated those parts of his dream - when the living dead looked at him as if he had answers. Walt once helped build a new wing for a museum along the Mississippi where the living proudly displayed the dead. People eagerly gawked at old Indian bones, Egyptian mummies, and other oddities. Walt wondered what the attraction was, but likened it to a circus side show, cleaned up to sport genteel polish and perfume. They should be buried. Final wishes should be respected. In Walt's dream, bones behind glass argued and laughed at those who came to learn. Mostly they asked to be buried.

Walt sat beside his father and tried to avoid the scolding eyes. Burr brushed coal debris from the body. Tears welled in Walt's eyes as he missed his brother terribly, just out of reach. To make Walt smile, Burr flexed his bicep which made his tattoo come alive - a bull dog wearing a cockeyed helmet, and the words "Honor with Teeth" beneath. Then Burr smiled as he removed the old man's watch from a stiffened arm.

Rotting fingers pointed accusingly at the youngest son, yet Burr gave the watch to Walt. He mussed the young boy's hair playfully before walking onto the prairie. Walt tried to grab hold of his legs, but the black dusting that

covered Burr's body fell away until the breeze took him completely. And he was gone again.

Walt's grandfather came to shade young Walt and wipe away his tears. They turned from the critical eyes of the corpse just as a familiar forest rose on the prairie. It swallowed the mine entrance. Walking there in shadow, hand in hand, the two looked for the fishing hole. It took them a long time, as they necessarily walked slower than before. Grandfather breathed heavily and could barely walk. Shaky, he sat on a dead fall and told Walt the same thing his mother had said - about the direction a man takes. Far from the fishing hole, they searched but it stayed out of reach.

He always felt yearning for and dread of the lake. Walt's finest memories were there with his grandfather, but that is also where the old man died trying to save two children who had fallen into the water. When he jumped in for them they grabbed and clawed at him in a frantic effort to climb to the surface. In doing so they pulled the man down. He could have fought them off. But he wouldn't. Walt often thought about that day. His grandfather died well. How could he have lived with himself if he'd have kicked the children off to save himself? And so they

drowned together.

The dream was merciful to Walt in never letting them get to the fishing hole. Still, the aged man always left Walt alone on the forest paths while searching for the water. This time, he placed his trembling hand on Walt's shoulder and spoke of the end of the line. The cock crowed at him again, and shadows shrank.

Walt was rustled awake by the porter, "End of the line. Get off or pay further fare." Walt hoped the porter had not forgotten, and hadn't let him sleep through too many towns. Surely the whistle and commotion should have wakened him. He thought perhaps he didn't lose her. Walt would try and pick up Vivian's scent at this stop, or continue on if needed. Oddly, he did think he caught a whiff of her as the porter passed.

Chapter 22 - Inn Luck

Walt had a good feeling. The sun inched above the horizon, and he saw that this town boasted real streets, and more than just a few. It had a certain look. From his window he could see much bustle. He immediately started showing the locket to those who worked the train depot. No one could be certain they recognized Vivian's portrait, even though Walt told them that her hair was shorter now. As he looked around, he saw many women with the same kind of cut - proud as could be.

A clerk said that anyone new in town fresh off the train would end up at hotel row just up the street to the north. Another man said, "There's a café called 'Inn Luck' with rooms to let above - a boarding house cheaper than the hotels for a long stay. And downstairs there's good eatin'. Can't miss it. Just follow these folk."

Walt followed the crowd, thinking that anything called the "Inn Luck" would be a gambling establishment. The flow of people heading north ended at a row of buildings, although many stepped into waiting cars and disappeared - heading to the main part of town. The tall buildings seemed like canyon walls compared to what he had known.

These weren't the biggest, but were still too tall for comfort.

The building heights blocked the sunrise, and provided nothing but shadow for people to stir within. These brick fences seemed to accomplish more than barbed wire fences meant to keep livestock in one location. These kept folk from seeing what they wanted on the other side. Walt walked along the walls which opened to swallow the herds hurrying inside. It reminded him of the mines. An unnatural place for man to spend his days.

Canyon walls suddenly parted to allow a meadow of sorts, as Walt found himself facing an open space. A lush man-made valley. Like so many town squares with grass, trees and benches to sit. Many streets diverged in different directions like rivers. A large fountain rested in the center, but no water flowed.

Walt discerned what must be hotel row, as the other walls had huge windows with goods for sale - and mannequins dressed in their finery wearing sly smiles despite the depression in the streets. They seemed to say "Buy these clothes so you can be inside looking out." Walt would have none of it - nor would he put on such a false face. He had troubles that a little paint and polish couldn't brighten.

Among the hotels, beyond some checkered curtained windows, people filled all the available seats inside a café, which Walt decided must be the "Inn Luck." It wasn't as tawdry as he imagined. A few tables were placed outside beneath an awning, but each remained empty due to the temperature. As Walt tried to decide which way to go first in order to show his locket to shop owners, fortune smiled on him. He saw his wife.

Vivian came out of a shop. Walt recognized the letters which were in his own name, knowing it to be the Woolworth's store. His mother used to take him into the Woolworth in his home town. They'd get milk shakes and she would dream big dreams for him. He remained amazed at all that he could accomplish in her eyes. Walt ducked behind a lamp post and tried to hide the bulk of his body from Vivian's view. He watched her drift toward hotel row, while lingering at the shop windows along her way. He would not want to approach her just yet.

Vivian carried numerous packages and Walt wondered where she got the money. His mother's jewelry that she took from their tent couldn't have paid for all that and the train ticket and a hotel room taboot. He figured she might have gotten men to pay for her meals. Walt reasoned

also that her flirtations with Silas at the depot had earned her a discounted fare. Still, she seemed to have quite a lot of packages and new clothes on her back. When she wasn't lollygagging in front of the windows she strutted up the street like she had been given the key to the town. She wore the same painted smile as the mannequins - but brighter.

Walt stepped up the pace and got just a few yards behind her. He watched men on the street eye her and nod, tipping hats, whistling or offering to help her with those packages. It had been said that Walt cleaned up well, but that was several years in the past. He took a good look at himself in the reflections while trying to keep up with Vivian's brisk gait. He was dingy and stained. Rumpled and frayed. He hadn't washed nor shaved since the night of the dance. She couldn't see him like this - not here. She would feel compelled to scorn him. He needed to learn where she spent her nights.

Vivian turned into a narrow doorway between the 'Inn Luck' and an adjoining building. The door opened to a stairway which she climbed with the kind of confidence that told Walt she'd been there before. He moved up the narrow steps after her, as quietly as possible. He heard her

footfalls steadily fade down the hallway at the top of the stairs. Then he heard a key inserted into a lock. Peering around the corner, he caught a glimpse of her trying to squeeze all those jostling packages through the doorway at once. She made it inside the room successfully.

Walt gently stepped forward toward the room his wife had entered. Listening at the door, he heard the rustle of paper, of boxes, of cloth and hangers, then shoes. Suddenly she was at the door again, turning the locks and the knob. Walt bolted behind a leafy plant on a narrow table near the window at the end of the hall. He thought about Jule's suggestion to just hit and haul her home. It was an idea beginning to make some sense.

Vivian stepped into the hall and pulled the door snugly shut - then locked it with her key. She carried no packages now, but turned sharply down the hall toward the stairs. She stopped. Her head rose and tilted a bit as if listening carefully, or sniffing the air. Vivian had the senses of a hungry animal. She exhaled into a sigh and continued walking without turning.

Walt felt sure that his wife knew he was near. But he now had the luxury to look around. The carpet in the hall was worn, and paint peeled slightly but hardly noticeable.

But the walls held electric lighting, and there was indoor plumbing right there for residents of this floor to share. Walt jimmied the door open and then slid his bag beneath the bed so Vivian wouldn't notice. She had shopping debris piled everywhere. The room was decked out better than the hall. He knew it would take a little doing to pry his wife away from all these niceties.

As he approached the bottom of the stairs, Walt saw that Vivian had entered the café. She stood, waiting to be seated. He would look for day-work and approach her later that night - cash in hand.

Chapter 23 - Blossoms

The café boasted a handsome marble soda fountain and multi-colored glass shades over the lights along a mirrored wall. The establishment was crowded, so Vivian shared a table with two other couples. Two men at her table had piled their dishes precariously in the center while they slid bone dominoes into play within the open space. Their women ate breakfast so slowly it seemed as if they were in a contest trying to see who could finish last. Vivian smiled at the others. Men stopped their game for a moment to nod at the newcomer. Introductions began.

The large man moved his cigar to the other side of his mouth and gruffly announced, "Leroy Rex and Miss Melody."

The other man added quickly, "Just call me Nelson. An' this lovely lady is Skipper. She don't say much English. Her French name is impossible, so I call her Skipper. And I'll tell you that story."

He sipped his coffee. "Great story. She was stuck in a long line o' women-folk, old-folks and kids leavin' their village. Wasn't much left of it anyway - of the village or left of the war neither. Then along come a Hun gunner screamin' down out o' the sun for hedge hoppin' - ratta-

tat-tat-tat!"

Skipper cringed, hating the story that Nelson loved and told often. Nelson's story marched on. "Bandit strafed the whole derned line 'fore the skirts could scatter. Cold, is what that is. Strafe is German for punish, see, but there was no call for that - non-bon for certain." Nelson strafed the table again with his trigger fingers, "ratta-tat-tat-tat!" Then he finished the story.

"See, the woman in front of her and the woman behind both got hit. That's why this here's my Skipper. Get it? Skip, her?" Everyone got it.

Nelson explained more. "Bombs were droppin' round me so much I could barely walk. Kept getting' knocked down. Mite hard to advance if you're pickin' yerself up every few steps. I had my face in the dirt so much it probably saved me. Then, I found a buddy what could talk frog, so she come home with me - and that's that. Got me a souvenir. Best there is." He slapped Skipper's leg.

Vivian studied the tiny dancing muscles on Skipper's face and determined that Nelson's souvenir knew more English than she let on. Language has a way of seeping in somehow, especially fifteen years since Armistice. Skipper noticed Vivian's knowing. The two women shared a grin - so

slight that it was more in the eyes than in the corners of their mouths. More felt than seen.

Nelson and Skipper prepared to leave, and Vivian was sorry to see them go. They gave their seats to two men who appeared to be ranchers. They had a boy with them who sat on the floor by the window after one of the men tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the corner. Introductions began again, adding Hubert and Albert to the table, along with little Stanley on the floor.

Hubert said to no one in particular, "Sky's lookin' a bit murky. I'd swear I heard thunder rumblin' if it weren't so late in the season." He saw Melody looking at the nubs of what was left of his fingers, lost to a steel mill. Hubert smiled broadly and held his hands for all to see. "This is what comes from bitin' your nails."

Albert joined Leroy Rex's game of dominoes and offered apologies for his brother. Hubert just chuckled and quoted Popeye, "I yam what I yam and that's all what I yam."

Leroy Rex was not quite ready to leave, but Melody had already headed toward the door in a huff. Vivian thought Hubert was funny. She looked over her own hand. The sliver of wood had begun festering. She picked at it regularly, watching the pus move in a bubble beneath the

reddened infected skin.

Albert snapped his fingers at the boy on the floor and then pointed to Melody's empty chair. Stanley quickly scampered up to the table. He held his young hand open to Vivian, "See my ring?"

Hubert inserted, "Found it in the alley yesterday just shinin' up at the sun. Got a big ol' turquoise stone set in silver. Might be a reward. We figure some vulture ate somebody two counties over and nature pushed it through for us."

Albert scowled at Hubert while the waitress came to remove dishes, refill coffee and take more orders. She asked Stanley if he'd like some cream on his eggs. He thought that'd be swell. "Just a smidge, please." She scooped the cream off the top of her pitcher and then poured him a tall glass of milk. Stanley sipped it and wrinkled his nose. "Tastes like weeds."

Hubert slapped the boy up the backside of his head.

"Well, it does," he whimpered.

The waitress lifted Stanley's chin slowly with a long slender finger and gently said, "It happens. Can't control what that cows get into. Drink it anyway."

Hubert commented, "You're ruinin' that boy, Albert."

His mama won't want him back spoiled. I never seen a boy so coddled." Hubert jumped and cursed as Stanley kicked him under the table.

Vivian was amused, and Albert laughed out loud rubbing the top of Stanley's head, "Good boy."

"Good?" Hubert scoffed with indignation.

"I told you he's mine. I saw him first, so you leave him be."

Leroy Rex asked, "He's not your boy?"

"Found him. Just walkin' along the roadside. Says his daddy died so his mama sent him out to find work and send money home. She got several others at home. He was eight then. Ten now, if ya can believe it. A runt, I 'spect - but he's got gumption. We let him sweep floors and stock shelves. He won't wear his shoes - mind ya, he does have shoes."

"Don't wanna wear 'em out." Stanley's eggs and sausage dropped from his mouth in bits back onto his plate as he spoke.

Hubert returned to the subject of young Stanley's ruination. "That school mightn't let him back in either. Can't say which one o' you is more at fault."

Albert laughed proudly as he asked Leroy Rex and

Vivian, "You two wanna hear what this boy did in school?"

Albert snapped his fingers, "Tell it, boy."

Stanley finished his milk and wiped what dripped down the corners of his mouth with his sleeve. "Mrs. Lloyd makes me eat crackers with her instead of getting' a whole lunch with the other kids."

Hubert added, "The poor woman's at wits end. Can't think of how to fix him."

Stanley continued, "But I like having lunch with Mrs. Lloyd, and that upset her. I gave her my arrowheads that I like to rattle in my pocket, but she was still mad."

Stanley reached for the jam but Albert slapped his hand away.

"Finish the story."

"She said I'm a dawdler. Which isn't as bad as what she called Cecil because she said he was flea bit - and scrawny, too."

"I'll tell it", Hubert offered. "He just sits and doesn't do his work. She wouldn't send him home because he'd like that. She couldn't beat him because she said his eyes haunted her. Give 'em the look."

Stanley dropped his chin and the corners of his mouth, raising his brow. He looked up at Leroy Rex and Vivian

through his lashes. They nodded - it was quite effective.

Hubert began again, "His last spell of sittin' lasted three months long. He finally got mad at her yakkin' about it so he just crumpled his paper into a ball, threw it across the room, followed it, stomped it, spat on it, and then returned to his seat. Shameful. Poor woman stopped talkin' to him after that."

"Well, she wouldn't quit tellin' me what to do," Stanley explained.

Albert finished, "She talked to the principal though, about the spittin'. It seems he had taken to doing that whenever the mood struck. So he had to stay after school and mop floors."

"But I liked that, too."

Hubert said, "So they don't know what to do with him."

"I sure do like Mrs. Lloyd."

"They're gonna haul her away in a giggle wagon if you don't behave."

Stanley stood and grabbed the jam quickly before he could be slapped again. "I'll give her my best baseball card."

"Not the Babe Ruth."

With sparkling eyes he told Vivian excitedly, "I got

more demerits than anybody else! Even more than Vance, and he's mean. I don't do mean stuff."

Hubert added, "You don't do *anything*."

Vivian adored little Stanley and enjoyed watching him lick jam from his fingers. She missed her own children just then. It came in a sudden jolt. A horrible pain seized her insides as she remembered what she'd fought hard to forget: how they felt as she held them. Soft and warm. They looked up at her and reached their tiny fingers to touch her face.

"You okay ma'am?" Leroy Rex asked.

Vivian nodded and slid her chair back from the table. The two Berts bid her good-day. Then Hubert tsked and blamed Albert for making Stanley tell disturbing stories, and Albert blamed Hubert for shoving his missing fingers into ladies' faces.

Chapter 24 - Eli

Walt peered above the café curtain from the street as Vivian ate. While watching her, he heard a voice from behind. "You hungered?" Walt shook his head no, without looking toward the voice. "You lookin' in that winda like you hopin' somebody'll drop somethin' offa they's plates."

Walt turned to face a Colored man standing in the alley. The man motioned at Walt to join him. "I get leavin's back here at that there alley door. Never et so good in all mah days! They give you some. I knows there's more. Jus' let me know when you plan on comin' round here sose I can get here first, yessir. They's pleasant to me, but I 'spect they'd be right Christian at you - an' I might starve."

Walt's upbringing dictated that he not take charity, but rather work hard to get situated on the giving end. Still, his stomach rumbled and if the folk behind the alley door needed someone to give to, he wouldn't deprive them.

The swarthy man knocked on the door and then stepped aside. A perspiring young woman opened it. She held up one finger for Walt to wait. He heard the scraping of dishes inside, and the woman returned. She handed the men

their plates, with food piled high. There were egg bits, corners of muffins and crusts of toast with jelly balancing against half eaten sausages. It looked wonderful - and smelled better.

While eating, Walt savored each bite. Textures, flavors and the steaming heat of it all brought to mind a particularly harsh time when his mother's resources ran thinnest. Do-gooders brought food. They found larger shoes and longer pants for him and his brother. Walt's mother told the boys to remember how this felt, and one day help others. Drying her eyes with her apron, his mother quietly repeated, "Remember how this feels."

As the young woman set out two cups of steaming coffee, she looked at the Colored man and smiled. "You gonna bring all your friends here, Eli?"

"He ain't no friend o' mine, Miss Adelaide. He just hungered." Eli was careful to keep his head lowered and not look at the woman. He'd seen what trouble that caused.

"Just don't walk off with the dishes. Leave 'em here on these crates when you're done and I'll get 'em later."

Eli assured her, "I'll tell him the rules."

The men sat on barrels, thanking Adelaide as she retreated inside the busy kitchen. Walt also thanked Eli -

to which he nodded and shrugged. Eli liked to talk over breakfast, and so he began telling Walt about his travels north from his home.

"Whole diff'rent world up here. Colder in some ways and warmer in others. I get here and don't know what kind o' place I stepped in! I been countin' Colored folk like me cause they's so few and far between! I'm up to eighty-seven. I 'spect if I get more north I'll be countin' backward soon enough, yessir. North got a sign on it sayin' White, and the south got a sign on it sayin' Colored."

Walt assumed that by his speech on signs that Eli was educated. "You read? I'll pay ya to read for me."

"You got money, mister? Yea, I read. I don't need payin' for readin' a letter from yer people, but if'n I gotta go somewhere wid you, or if'n it takes more day'n I got, then I'll take yer pay, thanky."

"I need work." Walt usually just looked for a line of men to stand in - but reading the signs would save time and trouble.

"Fella yer size can get work anywheres. But I know where you needin' to be. They's diggin' a pit. Truck comes by the post office right regular, and come again in

just a few minutes more. You get up on it. Fair money can be had there. If you're strong! No breaks, not even for lunch. No water. Nothin'. Not all day long. At least we ain't in the hot season, cause there be no shade there. Rules are simple. No talkin', no complain' an' no stoppin'. Diggin', diggin' and more diggin'."

Walt listened to Eli and watched an orange cat perched high on a window sill. It crooked its tail back and forth with the timing of a clock and kept its eyes on the men and their food. The bricks of the building complimented the cat, burnt orange as well. Walt thought perhaps the morning sun gave such a tint. He wondered how the little bearded painter was faring in these times.

Eli continued while chewing, "Looks like you got the back for it. An' they know soon 'nuff if'n you got the sand. They pay good and pay ever' day. But drop an' they just haul you out by yer heels and set you to sides - cause there's a hunnered other men waitin' in line for that job. Come wid me. That's where I goin'." Then Eli muttered something about deserving a prize for bringing such a big worker to the pit.

Walt finished eating and set his plate with Eli's where the young woman said. The cat scampered down from

its height to lick what the men left - which wasn't much. Eli walked fast through the street, stepping aside to let all the White people go by without having to alter their path. No use asking for trouble by making a White step out of his way. That just begs for trouble.

Eli didn't like to talk just when he ate, but also when he walked. "You be seein' lots o' diff'rent kinds on that truck besides you and me, but we all come back out powdered in sandy brown dust from the pit. Some folk is more Popish than others - and that can be a problem. You got your Injuns, Mexicans, Chinamen, and White men what don't speak the language any better'n all the others."

Walt hadn't thought on it before, but agreed with Eli. Language makes all the difference. Wherever Eli's people came from they'd been here so long they clean forgot their own language. They probably won't speak it in their sleep, or even when they've gone mad.

"Injuns know the language but they don't like talkin' it." Eli laughed, "They even call me a Black White man - thinkin' I'm one of you!"

Eli then assured Walt, "But Boss be likin' you. They mix us wid our natural enemy so we don't organize - too busy fightin' each other to fight Boss. You need to push

all o' them out o' yer way so Boss knows you a born foreman, or mebbe more."

Walt shrugged and mumbled while shaking his head, "Don't know how long I'll be here."

Eli spoke softer than he had before. "What I said to Miss Adelaide back there - that you ain't my friend? See, I wouldn't think o' bein' your friend, mister, but I am thinkin' I could work for you. I'll read and wrangle up some better work - a place where they let you eat lunch and find water. And I can make sure you get paid right, too, just in case you and yer numbers ain't on speakin' terms neither. But it'd be helpful if you keep ever'body from bustin' mah head open. Yessir, I 'member all mah lessons better when I'm not bleedin'. Deal?"

To Eli's surprise, Walt held out his hand to shake - and they had a deal. But again, Walt said, "Don't know how long I'll be here."

Eli's eyes popped when he realized how best to use Walt's potential. "Do you box?"

He didn't wait for Walt to answer. "I could scare up some fights. I'd be your manager! I used to fight some." Eli punched at the air between them. "But I's good for nothin' but to be a bleedin' punchin' bag. You, though.

Look at you! You a champion!"

Walt shook his head.

Eli moaned, but continued with enthusiasm. "Since you be doin' all our heavy work its natural for you to get more'n 50-50. I just need expense money. I know you a fair man - so I don't mind doin' the books. It'd be bare knuckle at first - nostalgic like - how they done it in the old days. Later on mebbe we can do it up right and tour the world! You and me. The ring likes all colors - friends of fightin' don't even notice mine. What'll we call you? I don't even know your name."

"Walt."

"Walt the Wonder. Work-Horse Walt. Wicked Walt." Eli mumbled as many complimentary or frightening "W" words as he could think of, and a few others that rhymed but wouldn't work. He finally asked for Walt's surname.

Walt admitted: "They called me 'One Round Walter'."

Eli's eyes popped again. "Tell me they call you that 'cause ya win in the first round."

Walt nodded.

Eli laughed a little scream and smiled all over himself. "We gonna be rich!"

Walt's thoughts were not filled with earthly ambition,

but were dancing around his wobbling integrity. A world tour would get him away from his wife. And Lord knows, it was a constant struggle to keep from simply walking away. So many other men had - claiming they couldn't bear to watch their family starve. But by leaving they almost ensured that it would happen.

Walt needed to figure out how to keep Vivian from undermining every foundation he built atop the ruins of the previous catastrophe she caused. Or, he just needed money. Still, Walt didn't think boxing to be the direction to take. He shook his head some more. "Didn't like it much."

Walt never did like boxing. Beating some poor soul to a pulp for money just didn't seem right. Anger can make a man express himself with his fists, but Walt was never angry at his opponent. Punches in a ring amounted to staged anger - which amounted to a lie. His handler at the time said to imagine the other guy as Hunger itself, and go after him. But Walt knew the other guy was hungry, too.

He always pulled his punches if the fighters weren't matched well. Little guys made up for their size by sheer ferocity - and speed. Maybe it was desperation. Walt didn't want to box, but it seemed to mean a lot to Eli. Even so, if he fought again he could make enough money to

keep Vivian home - and happy. And then he could take up painting while he recovered from cuts and blows.

Eli blocked Walt's contrary views. "You don't hafta like it. You just gotta win and put us on easy street. You'll like that plenty. I shouldn't hafta remind ya that we just ate beggin' scraps in an alley."

Walt thought that was hitting below the belt.

Eli bobbed and weaved around Walt's argument. "Likin' gettin' punched is for crazy folk - ain't especially manly to like it." Eli reached up and patted Walt's shoulder. "Winnin' is what we like. And winnin' is right manly. No sirree, we don't hafta like boxin' none. I'd never ask ya to do that!"

Walt remembered his days inside a ring made of shifting gamblers. He typically planted his feet and waited for his opponent to come to him. That way, Walt could be certain the other fella really wanted what's coming. It didn't take too long after that before it was over.

Walt tried to warn Eli without butting heads. He said, "Promoters don't like me none. I didn't give 'em a good show."

Eli counter punched. "Oh, I can teach ya show. Just

play a part and they pay ya. Be whatever they want. I do it all day long. Like riggin' yer own game."

"Sounds dishonest."

"It's business, that's all. Ya don't hafta let the other guy knock ya out - just let him think he might win. Yesirree, we gonna be rich. Then we be free."

They neared the post office where many men milled around waiting for the truck. Eli could not get Walt to agree to a world tour. He just kept saying he didn't know how long he'd be in town. Walt did say though that he'd think on it - and that let Eli win the first round.

The group of men shuffled their feet and shifted their weight. Most hung their heads low. Eli stayed just behind one of Walt's elbows while they waited. They listened to girls in a nearby schoolyard begin to jump rope. Their poem involved the public lynching of two White men - which was broadcast live over the airwaves.

The girls jumped and rhymed: *"Poor Brooke Hart/ Never got a start/ The handsome heir/ California fair/ On a fateful day/ Found him in the Bay/ Justice stallin'/ Mob come a callin'/ Murderous louses/ Come outta jailhouses/ Up a tree they go/ And get on the radio."*

A high-walled truck approached, chased by its cloud of

dust. The driver gave a wide berth to the right and circled the men at enough speed that his back bumper made a wider circle. The driver hooted the whole way and waved his hat out the window. Stopping short on the other side of the group, the men climbed onto the truck - coughing for the dust.

A few men tried to get Eli out of his seat by simply sticking their thumb out of their fist and jolting it backwards into the air. That said plenty with no words. Eli started to stand. He didn't want to be told again in stronger terms. But Walt said, "Stay." And that was that. None of the men wanted to tangle with Walt.

Eli felt like grinning ear to ear but knew better. He looked down and tried to sink his ears beneath his shoulders to hide from both the frosty glares of others and the brisk weather. If he watched his manners he could stay alive to read and manage Walt's future. He'd push Walt up a ladder - and necessarily climb that ladder as well. He would take care not to let Walt tumble back down and be himself kicked off altogether in the process. There seemed to be no end to the heights they could climb. No end to the possibilities.

While Eli dreamed of glory and gold, Walt pondered how

he would approach his wife that night. He would need to be firm - even angry. He wanted to hold her.

Chapter 25 - Holding Her

Work in the pit involved moving earth from one place to another at the whim of men who live inside of clean clothes and fill their own personal pit with cigar smoke. It was true, what Eli said. Out there, money could be had if a man could work all day with no water, no food and no rest. Talk was not allowed because Boss didn't want the men organizing. Digging, hauling, and breathing fine dust was how Walt spent about twelve hours. And some men did get dragged out by their heels. They were replaced by those hungry enough to stay on their feet. Walt held out, collected his pay, then rode the truck back to the Postal Station.

Eli invited Walt to douse their thirst at a place he knew: the "*Shy Annie*." Yankees didn't mind if Eli dropped by. He didn't even have to be a musician to be welcome. Eli assured Walt that he'd be let in, too. "We'll wet our whistle and dance our dust away. The band there'll beat the walls an' raise the roof."

The sun had already left them and Walt's throat was drought-dry, but he wanted something cold, not strong. And he did like jungle music as much as the next man, but his

thoughts never strayed far from his wife. "I got to get home."

Eli's disappointment fell over his whole body. "Oh, now, don't think I'll keep you out too late - not till they toss us out, that is. We can goose an' grab at all the women-folk what can be grabbed, and we'll watch our drinkin' like good boys - watch it in the mirror." Eli laughed. "Pitytakes, Mr. Walt. I'll have ya home 'fore our slip starts to show."

Eli wanted to keep in Walt's good graces. If he had a chance of hitching his cart to that horse and be dragged up the mountainside, he'd better learn when to stop whipping. He saw that Walt would not go anywhere but home. "Okeydoke then. Suit yerself. Meet ya at that alley door in the mornin' for breakfast."

Walt nodded. The evening air felt good as he walked back to the boarding house above the café. He remembered how Vivian once told him it was a Darky who taught her not to be afraid of the dark. She said it with such a sly smile and even a blush that Walt knew what she meant. But that was years ago when she thought her jokes would go right over his head. Eventually, she knew different but couldn't care less. He didn't have to think much on

whether or not she had actually been unfaithful. Until he actually caught her, he could say it wasn't true. And he didn't go out of his way trying to learn different.

Walt tried the door handle to Vivian's room but it wouldn't turn. He knocked and she answered. Seeing him, her eyes narrowed before she hit Walt hard in the heart with her palm. Her sliver pressed into a nerve. A cloud of dust shot out of his jacket, disappearing just as fast.

She tried to slam the door in his face, but Walt pushed his way inside. Vivian wore a dressing gown as soft as flower petals and just as pink. It had a design of thin vines. The cloth waved when she walked the way tall grasses roll with the wind. She knew he would come for her, but she put her chin in the high air and turned her back without a word. Walt had nothing particularly friendly he wanted to toss her way either.

He swung the door shut, rattling the pictures on the walls. He pulled his bag out from under the bed, propping it up at the wall. After clearing the chair of Vivian's purchases, shoving them to the floor, he sat and leaned back against the wall. In the most reasonable tone manageable, Walt said, "Fill me a wash tub and get my supper. I'm workin' a quarry again, so we'll live here

till I say we don't."

It was their habit to gently seize power from one another. And it was Walt's turn, so Vivian did as she was told. A wash tub was dragged from down the hall and Vivian placed it in the room. Being on the second floor, she knew to stomp, searching out the hollows where the floorboards gave way, until she found a joist underfoot. She placed the tub there. Then she hauled buckets of warm water to fill it near half way - and brought him a bar of soap as well.

In between the sounds of running water, Walt listened to the goings-on beyond his walls: A couple talking to his left, someone plucking a guitar to his right, horses and honking horns below on the street, and soft footsteps above. Walt undressed, leaving his dusty clothing piled in a corner for Vivian to wash and hang in the morning. She laid his shiny new shaving kit on the bed, and left to go get his supper.

Walt waited for his wife to return before he stood and dried himself with one of her new dresses, which he retrieved from the floor. The only clothing he put back on was a pair of loose overalls from his bag, bothering to put only one strap to his shoulders. His supper waited for

him. Walt stood to eat - as the sideboard was higher than a table. Vivian pulled his chair nearby and sat. She pinched a few bites even though she had already eaten her meal earlier. Walt didn't mind her stolen nibbles.

While chewing, Walt commented. "This place is too fancy. Don't need it. I'm breakin' my back and you're spendin' money like I own my own business. That's not for me and it'll never be me. But you might have gotten all the frillies you could handle if you'd quit runnin' every chance you get."

Vivian didn't respond, but Walt knew there was no end to her want. Still, the arithmetic on all her desire summed to just one thing: that sailor. The baubles she bought remained a poor substitute. There was no sugar-coating the fact.

"I'll be back early tomorrow. There's a Fair." With that, Vivian knew to be where she could be found or he'd go without her. Walt loved Fairs.

Earlier, Eli had read Boss' signs. They could get Christmas off with no pay and no promise to be welcomed back after. Or, they could work two half days between now and then. Walt asked Eli "when's Christmas", to which he replied: "Monday. Boss likes it when Christmas falls on

Sundays 'cause we got that day off anyway. Tell the bookkeeper which way ya wanna go, Christmas at home or no. But half days ain't really half - more like three-quarter - whenever he feels like blowin' that whistle. I ain't got family here so makes no nevermind to me. I'm with you. If you want that Fair, take the half days and be merry on Christmas Eve with yer woman."

And so they would work two half days.

The bed was the softest Walt had ever fallen into. He sank and the covers billowed, embracing him from all sides. He felt he could sleep well despite guitar plucking next door. Vivian rubbed scented cream on her hands and face. Walt wouldn't ask where she got the money to pay. He figured she was up to her old tricks. He wished she'd outgrow her habit of bewitching men out of their pay whenever she wandered away. Women can't keep doing it forever.

Vivian sat on the bed, which Walt thought odd, since she always cursed him for sagging the edges. But this bed wasn't hers, so she didn't care. Her hair brushed the back of her neck as she worked moisturizer along her legs. The sharp edges of it swished like the rooster's sickled tail feathers. He was right - that hair cut was trouble.

The pink cloth swished also, dancing across her back with every subtle movement. The vines climbed her body. Walt took her by the arm and pulled her back onto the bed. She uttered an obscenity as he rolled squarely atop her, but he answered her curses by shoving her gown up over pink thighs. Roughly, he spread the vines to either side, exposing her breasts.

She pushed the heel of her hand in his face, but was slippery with the cream, and took to slapping him. Her features scrunched and howled. Her claws came out and she thrust them into his arm. He took both her wrists in one of his hands and held them over her head. Walt had tired of waiting.

He figured if women got everything they ever whined about then they would never complain again - having nothing left to demand. Trouble is, they'd been given jobs and even the vote, but it didn't make them happy. Women really didn't want what they fuss for. They didn't truly want to penetrate the world like men. It was just their strange and weakened nature to be content with dissatisfaction. They even hunger for it. Walt came to understand an important secret. It was the endless wanting, not the getting, that drove them. But the getting must occur.

Vivian kicked at his legs, wrestled against his arms, and worked up a sweat. She fought and got loud so the neighbors started banging on walls and stomping on the ceiling. Eventually, the landlady came to holler through the door. "Are you all right, Miss Lewis?"

Walt growled, "She ain't Miss Lewis! She's my missus an' she's busy."

"Well I can't have you disturbin' my tenants."

He apologized, but the woman continued with a short sermon. "You know, it's not yours to make certain she does her wifely duty. That's between her and God."

Walt thanked her for leaving and turned his attention once again to his wife. Vivian tossed her head violently to each side, trying to get out from under his hand covering her mouth. He whispered to her while kissing her neck, "I've met women whose clothes fall off if a fella just smiles their way. I get nothin' from you, Viv."

Vivian needed to put up a good fight - proving her love for Lewis. And she knew that Walt knew. He only demanded her duty every week or so. She figured if men got everything they demanded they'd never want for anything again - having nothing left to demand. Trouble was,

everything they wanted, they wanted repeatedly. And they came to expect service - morning, noon and night - in one fashion or another. Steak, cake, and shake. No matter how many times she made it clear that she didn't want to be manhandled by him, Walt never gave up. Vivian came to understand an important secret. It was the endless wanting, not the getting, that drove them. But the getting must occur.

She watched the wallpapered leaves shiver down around her. The headboard banged against the wall like gunfire. Bang, bang, bang. Walt perspired heavily and drops of sweat fell from him.

Vivian closed her eyes. When she did, she heard her memory knock, knock, knock as parishioners came to speak to her father. He counseled members of his church, and Vivian often listened from behind furniture, while quietly playing with her dolls. One young wife came to him, distraught over her husband's disturbing habit of wanting marital relations whenever he felt the urge. With Walt's breath heavy on her ears Vivian recalled the conversation between the woman and the minister.

"It's not called wedlock for nothing," he told her.

Flipping through his Bible, he showed her the verse which says a woman's body belongs to her husband. But then he continued. "The same verse says likewise, a husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife does."

The woman's face lit up. "It says that?"

He nodded. "And that's why people need to go to school and learn to read - for protection against fly-by-night flimflam men selling you short, trying to convince you of all manner of lies."

Excited, she asked, "So if I tell my husband to not touch me, then he has to?"

The preacher adjusted his glasses and spoke slow and clear. "Well, doesn't he avoid you for most of the day? For twelve hours at a stretch, or more?"

The woman looked confused and the color drained from her face. That sight always fascinated Vivian.

"Maybe he leaves you alone for twenty-three-and-a-half hours per day? In comparison, it's not too much to ask. Don't you agree?"

She gripped the handles of her purse tightly on her lap, pushing the bag downward into her thighs until it buckled. She remained unable to think of a worthy reason

to counter such logic - although she gave it much effort. The woman began to sputter.

Vivian's father spoke with compassion. "There, there. I understand. And that's another good reason why we send you to school. So you can do the math and feel better about your role. You're getting the lion's share of the deal! If it weren't so, why we'd be in a frightful mess. Think of that. If women didn't spur their men out of bed now and then, no civilization would have been built."

He thanked the young woman heartily, and moved from his desk to put his arm around her, leading her from his office to the front door. From Vivian's vantage point, it was a good thing he helped her walk, as it did look like her long, slender legs were wobbly and might buckle.

Her father made assurances that it would all work out and she'd be fine. The kind preacher told her to come back anytime if she had more problems. The woman stood on the porch alone, visibly shaking. From the window, Vivian thought she could hear her troubled heart beating. Thump, thump, thump.

Walt's strength subsided after many wild thrusts. He moaned and collapsed, sighing himself into a still, sweaty

silence - his full weight upon her.

Vivian would never admit to Walt how much that particular moment meant to her. It possibly lasted several minutes, when Walt pressed against her body fully. His weight made her feel safe, as if she were tucked into a hiding place full of warmth and security - where no beast or dragon or any other evil could find her. There, in that darkness, in Walt's shadow, her body relaxed.

Walt stroked her hair away from her face and kissed her tenderly. She turned her lips from him, effectively offering her cheek, ear and neck. He moved his affections across her skin and pressed his face into the soft flesh of her neck. He held himself there while kneading her arms and shoulders - hard, then soft.

Walt rose from the bed. It bounced lightly as he left, making her feel exposed and vulnerable. She wished he had stayed longer. The cold air hit her moist skin and gave her a chill from head to toe. Walt picked a corner of the bedsheet from the floor and handed it to his wife. She covered herself quickly and turned from him in a movement more swift than she'd meant, but the lightness of his absence made her nearly float up from the bed in a perverse

freefall - loose and chaotic. Untethered.

Vivian listened as Walt washed at the tub of water. He would return and enjoy the feel of her back against him. The couple would not speak until morning - having nothing to say. That suited them both just fine.

Chapter 26 - Skipper

In the morning, Walt noticed that the floorboards complained of someone's walking, and he could hear birds in the tree outside. Stirring to his left and right, people were waking. No one moved yet above his head, and he appreciated that. All in all, he felt, it might turn out to be a good morning. He got ready for work and went to meet Eli in the alley.

Vivian slept in longer than Walt, but eventually her thoughts returned to the fascinating quiet French woman, and she became hungry for an omelet. The Café smelled delicious - tempting with an assortment of fresh baked goods, cinnamon and coffee. Vivian loved waking to the sound of sizzling bacon. It reminded her of home, where she would lie in bed rubbing her feet together and listen to her parents talk and laugh. Their voices meandered through the whole house along the heating ducts.

But the Café kitchen staff could not be heard over the clanging of dishes, customer conversation and a little bell mounted over the door - tinkling with regularity. The café was busy. People eagerly stood in line for the "Friday

Morning Special" - with extra everything.

Vivian was right - Nelson and his trophy were again having breakfast at the Café. Because she was alone, Vivian didn't have to wait long in line. She got seated quickly on the last available stool at the counter. She ordered two meals and tried to stay out of Skipper's eye-line.

Vivian was in no hurry to eat, since Skipper and Nelson had just begun as well. Nelson was talkative. The old warrior became quite animated while telling a story to his captive audience. Skipper had obviously heard it before. She lazily rearranged crumbs with her fork between bites. Except for that slight stirring and her chewing, she sat perfectly still - and even that was done so slowly it was practically imperceptible. Without those tiny movements, she could have been taken for a statue.

Vivian noticed the lazy slide of Skipper's thumb on the fork - up, then down. Her eyes fixed on a lob of strawberry jam hanging precariously on the edge of Nelson's plate. She'd make a pretty statue. Nelson could prop her up wherever he went and wear himself out talking at her day and night.

Nelson was out of earshot but Vivian gathered that his tale included binoculars, snappy salutes and some kind of wild beast clawing the air. Vivian's two meals arrived by the time Nelson's story had gotten to some kind of tea party. With his pinky finger extended properly, he cocked his head this way and that in witty banter with himself. Skipper bit daintily into toast. She licked jam from the corner of her mouth - the house favorite.

Vivian finished one of her meals and hurried to pay. She told the waitress she'd sit by the window and wait for her husband. She had to wrestle with the waitress to keep that second plate. The tall braided woman insisted, "I'll just keep it warm for him." There was a bit of a tussle - but Vivian prevailed. That plate was essential to her plan.

Heading toward the window by way of Skipper's table, Vivian judged the distance and caught a chair leg with her foot. She went down - grabbing Nelson's shoulders and bumping a gruff man at another table. Her plate sang out with a startling clatter - bouncing onto Skipper's plate, knocking over her water glass. It would have fit well with Nelson's story of the ratta-tat-tat-tat strafing pilot.

Only the biscuit remained on the plate - but the rest slid, taking flight. The omelet, bacon and gravy sailed right into Skipper's lap. Success.

Vivian ignored the pain in her bruised forearm while she surveyed the damage. Coffee only sloshed a bit, and since the food had cooled while Vivian ate, the target was unharmed.

Skipper's hands went up in the air while a few French words did a quick-march out of her mouth. She kept her arms raised and leaned as far back in her chair as possible - as if that would put some distance between her and the mess. Vivian performed her most mortified gasp and began collecting napkins from whoever offered in the area. She dabbed at the flowers on Skipper's dress as she timidly stood. Waitresses rushed to the scene. The breakfast plopped and dripped to the floor. And Nelson laughed.

Vivian had hunted before and knew how to trap a target. This time, though, she didn't want to harm her prey. By the time she was done sputtering apologies, Skipper would have no alternative but to let her make amends.

Waitresses fell to their knees swiping wet rags across

the floor, while Vivian assured Nelson that she would walk Skipper home and pay for cleaning. It was the least she could do. Nelson agreed. No need to further interrupt his meal - he would stay.

Skipper walked awkwardly, trying to keep the wet skirt from touching her legs. Each step brought a cold slap. Vivian was glad they didn't have far to walk. The women were silent as they walked the two blocks to Skipper's home - above the shop where Nelson upholstered furniture and sold carpets. The stairs were extremely narrow and snow rested in the corners. They entered from the street and climbed to a tiny landing with a door on either side. As Skipper put the key into the lock, Vivian whispered, "I think you know English."

Skipper hesitated and turned to look a bit over her shoulder. She could not see Vivian clearly out of the corner of her eye - but Vivian saw surprise flash in Skipper's eye.

With the door closed behind them, Skipper smiled and asked, "May I take the coat?"

Vivian's coat looked ragged hanging on a hook next to Skipper's. Their home was clean and cozy. Furniture

didn't match, but in that odd way every piece matched the other. Color seemed to burst from every corner and reminded Vivian of the home of her crazy aunt. Vivian's aunt never sat on a chair, but squatted behind her heels with knees up by her ears. She looked like a leggy grasshopper - and was mean. But Skipper was gentle, and graciously motioned for Vivian to sit. "You will like some tea?"

Across the room, Skipper put a kettle on the stove. She moved with grace and confidence. This felt more and more like home, although Vivian was reared in a large rambling house in Kansas that had ginger-breading around a porch with a well-used swing. There, she spent many hours laying her head on her father's knee as he gently rocked back and forth. Mournful sounds of boards cried beneath his foot as he pushed the swing back. His heel scraped and his toe tapped each time he released. Vivian heard those boards and steps again as Skipper walked in her kitchen.

It occurred to Vivian that Skipper did not sabotage her husband's endeavors, and so was able to build a home. Not a mansion, but modest. Comfortable. The hostess brought a tray with crackers and relish, and set it beside

a few old magazines: *Good Housekeeping* and *Esquire*. Vivian tried to hide her inflamed palm. Before this moment, she hadn't been particularly eager to get rid of the splinter.

Skipper smiled broadly. "I be just a moment." She disappeared behind a green tasseled drapery. Vivian listened to shoes being kicked off, and dresser drawers being opened. The rustle of clothing was interrupted by a cuckoo clock on the wall, calling out the hour. The little door opened and a tiny, wooden yellow bird popped out, bobbing on a spring. "*Cuckoo! Cuckoo!*"

Skipper called out from behind the velvety wall, "Nelson will soon open shop down the stairs." She returned, smoothing her dress. "You do not bother pay for dress. I clean myself. No trouble."

The kettle whistled and Skipper hurried toward it while tucking a few loose strands of hair into her pins. Vivian hadn't truly regretted bobbing her hair until then. She was jealous of Skipper, but not in a bitter seething kind of way. She admired everything about her. Nelson was right - she was the best souvenir of the war. Pouring water over crushed tea leaves, Skipper asked, "Would you like to see my mother?"

Vivian hadn't expected that, but nodded. Motioning for her to follow, Skipper led Vivian behind the green drapery. Over a dresser hung masks. Faces in various expressions on the wall. Some were painted, and others remained a ghostly white. Smiling brightly, Skipper introduced the faces, beginning with her mother. "Do you like?"

Vivian couldn't answer. She had seen these haunting images in cemeteries where the dead seemed to emerge from tombstones, having been cast on a corpse before burial. Sometimes two or three faces stared back from the grave on a single stone. She had no idea that some people kept death masks as a decorative memorial in their home. Vivian was stunned.

"These are - these - oh, my. We have more in common than I thought."

"I am pleased. My family had shop before war. I learn there, and bring my mother to America. She is very fragile - I almost break several time. These others are friends. You see this is Nelson. Life mask for him now. I sell, for the mortician. He live in the next door. And sometime to sculptor for making the statues. Many statues

after war."

Vivian laughed and clasped her hands together at her heart. "Such beauty." Her eyes lingered on the curvatures of lips and chins. Each blemish, wrinkle, and eyelash visible forever. The life masks had nostril holes but were otherwise indistinguishable from the death masks. The mother's mask, however, was sleeping peacefully, as Skipper wanted.

Some had died with their mouths open and the plaster poured inside, showing depth beyond the teeth. Fortunately, dead customers didn't care. Expression of their agony was a perfect testament to how Vivian viewed the world. It is a terrible, terrible place. The display took her breath away.

Skipper glowed with pride. "There is much story in the faces. I must have your face here." She pointed to a bare spot on the wall. "My new friend."

Vivian agreed. She could not leave without having it done. Skipper instructed her to lie down. A towel was placed under her head, and a scarf tied all hair away from her face. Skipper warned that it was important to remain calm. She turned on her radio and gentle music filled the

room. Vivian thought, oh, how she missed that. Many campers kept their radios, hoping to one day live with electricity again. Need appeared more quickly though, and the radios were sold.

Skipper's fingers gently massaged petroleum jelly onto Vivian's face, especially along her hairline, on eyebrows, lashes and lips.

Vivian relaxed and grew sleepy, thinking of Skipper's ruse against Nelson. "Words just flow out of people like your husband. He doesn't worry about emptying his soul. I worry though. I think you do, too."

"Maybe that is it. My stories are safe."

"They get smaller if repeated every day."

"That is right. You understand." Skipper said, "I always want to remember. I want them to stay large. Not disappear. You learned my secret."

Curious, Vivian asked, "You don't ever speak to Nelson?"

"He have four sisters and four daughters. Surrounded by female nonsense, he say."

Skipper's expression became serious. "He loves me. What is there to say? Or to ask."

"It seems as though you don't like his stories."

"His stories are my stories. I don't like all my stories."

Skipper's tone changed to the business at hand. "You must not move. Be still and silent. Keep the lips together and the eyes closed."

She placed glass straws gently inside Vivian's nostrils so she could breath - and padded the straws with gauze. "Remember to stay calm. It will be strange." Skipper stirred the plaster with warm water until it became as cream. Then she spread the mixture evenly and especially thin so it wouldn't burn. "I smooth on your face. It will harden."

Her touch reassured, and Vivian did not want her to stop. "The boxer soak his bandage in this before wrapping the hands. So much cheating. The loser lose more than fight, but winner lose more. Sometime his teeth, or his life." Skipper kept talking softly so that Vivian would not become anxious. "Smile or frown as you like - as you are, or what you want to be."

While Vivian laid still, the music played and Skipper patted and rubbed her hand, assuring her that it would not

be much longer. Vivian's thoughts returned to a particular collage on Skippers wall. It was large, made of a lifeless tangle of arms and legs, torsos, hands and feet. There were no faces, except Skipper's own, buried beneath the pile of body parts. Her expression up against the wall grimaced with furrowed brow. Her painted eyes peered brightly through gravely interlocking limbs.

Skipper had explained the collage construction over tea. It was inspired by the day she earned her nickname. She saw the eyes of the pilot and felt that he saw her, too. Only her - as he tipped the plane's nose and fired. She prayed that the German would skip her. Bodies began to drop from bullets falling from the sky and Skipper took cover under the bodies. Other women and children tried to run for the trees, but the Hun chased them.

She watched for a long time as planes dipped, rolled, turned and climbed. They took passes at each other in the air like jousting knights. Some of them smoked and plunged through the clouds to earth in a fiery explosion that shook the ground. So many friends, dead and heaped where they fell into a pile on top of her, hid her from danger. Warm blood dripped in tear drops from their bodies. Skipper

focused on the dog fight in the sky so she wouldn't have to watch the blood.

For this, Skipper also made a mask of a man wearing goggles and a leather cap strapped at the chin. His face hung on the opposite wall near the ceiling. His eyes still fixed on hers from across the room, but she gave him no bullets - and no wings.

Finally, Vivian could come out from under the mask. She sat up and bent over, gently tugging until delivered from the cast. There she saw herself inverted in a perfect mirror. Skipper took the mask and lovingly laid it on a table. She led Vivian to the basin to wash.

Nelson came home in a good mood. He whistled a tune while he searched for his wife. He saw she had a customer and asked, "You ladies mind if I fix myself somethin' to eat?" Nelson didn't expect an answer. He went to slice some bread and hummed along with the radio.

Skipper whispered to Vivian, "You are married? I see your ring. He is good to you?"

Vivian shrugged, and then nodded. "He builds roads."

"But is he good to you?"

Vivian thought about it. She didn't want to avoid

answering Skipper's question, but she didn't want to admit that Walt never gave her real cause to hate him. She nodded again. "He's a good man."

"You must not tell him my secret. He will tell Nelson this when you bring him here to the dinner.

Vivian agreed not to tell, and for the first time she regretted having brought the law down upon herself. Suddenly her past endangered her future. "I'm sorry I spilled on your dress."

"You must not worry. I will fix."

Nelson finished in the kitchen and went downstairs to open his shop. Now Skipper again spoke above a whisper. "I will make mask of me for you." She tied her hair and began applying the Vaseline. "Do you have children?"

Vivian sat down and stumbled over the words. "I had three, but they all died."

"Oh. This is terrible. Very terrible. They are better place. I have four. All in school now. They come home for the food, then run to play with their friends. I don't see again until dark. When I that age I worked in factory." Skipper smiled at Vivian, "They speak French to me and English to Nelson." She laughed, "They know my

secret, too, but sometime they say I read their minds. We talk much when Nelson sleeps. He is heavy sleeper. Clear conscience, he say."

Skipper whipped the creamy plaster and laid down to apply the straws. "I must be quiet now for the minutes. Tell me about your children."

Vivian watched Skipper spread the plaster thinly over her face and wipe her hands on a towel as she lay. Clearing her throat, Vivian moved closer, but didn't know what to say. It was all so personal. She thought of leaving - simply walking out and never seeing Skipper again. That was her first instinct, but she spoke slowly, softly. "Two girls and a boy. Ruby, Ruth and Roy. They came many weeks early. So very tiny. They died a week ago yesterday."

Skipper stretched her arm toward Vivian's voice and wiggled her fingers slightly. Vivian took her hand, and Skipper squeezed gently. Vivian felt uncomfortable to the point of pain.

She studied the bowl of soapy water that Skipper kept beneath a lamp to reflect the light. Moths are tricked by this and fly into the suds. So eager to dive headlong to

their deaths. Normally this tenderness would make Vivian feel trapped - like moths, tricked by light. Instead, she felt safe.

Skipper held Vivian's hand tightly until she needed to take the plaster off. Vivian dipped a cloth in the wash water for her, and wrung it out tightly so it wouldn't drip. She felt the sliver in her palm - and saw that a portion of it had worked its way out in the water.

Skipper picked bits of plaster out of her hair and then smoothed the edges of the mask. She signed her name on the inside, and wrapped it with brown paper for her guest to take home.

Vivian was shaken by the conversation, and grateful for Skipper's silence on the subject from that point forward. Perhaps she noticed pain in her voice. Vivian needed to leave. She promised Skipper she would visit again, unless she must leave town with her husband. But in that case she would write. Skipper held her in a long embrace before she left, and stroked her hair. "I wish we'd have before so I could meet them." Skipper rubbed Vivian's back without letting her wriggle away.

Vivian could barely breathe. So much emotion, now

loosed from its safe place, could kill her if she didn't leave quickly. Skipper looked into her eyes with a piercing depth, as if she wanted to remember every curve, every line, or to say she understood. Vivian did not want her to look too closely and see flaws. She might even be frightened - or disappointed.

On the other side of the door, Vivian exhaled deeply - released. Why had she spoken to this woman? How could another person affect her so? Vivian was completely shocked, not only by the utter abandon with which she pursued this friendship, but by the fact that she did not once think to slip anything of Skipper's into her pocket. She stopped on the stairs to read what Skipper wrote on the inside of the mask. On the brow, the inscription read: "Like Saint Augustine and his friend, we are one soul in two bodies. Skipper."

Vivian hurried through the streets back to her boarding room above the café. She would need to sit in the darkness for several hours and contemplate the events in Skipper's home. Despite the turmoil she felt, she knew that wherever she traveled, no matter how far, she would never be alone in the world.

Chapter 27 - A Fair

When Walt got off work he collected Vivian from their boarding room - after a rushed bath to get the pit dust off of him. Then they hurried to the Fair. Walt carried a clip which advertised the World's Fair in Chicago. The theme: "Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms." Walt never liked the sound of that. But there was a sky ride, and Walt wondered whether it'd be like flying.

As a boy, Walt thrilled to watch the barnstormers. "Flying Circuses" buzzed rooftops and dropped leaflets to bring audiences out. His whole town shut down so everyone could gather at a farm and take rides in the clouds, for a fee. They did wondrous stunts in the air. Sometimes wing walkers danced or stood on their heads. Fearless ones, or perhaps the mad ones, stepped from one plane to another. Sitting in a car or on a train, a man could grab a rope suspended from the plane. Such bravado. Sometimes they fell without a parachute, but Walt only saw that once, and remembered how the ladies cried for days.

Regardless, Chicago was too far, so the County Fair would have to do. Walt usually looked forward to the

flavored ice, but there was a nip in the air. Nobody bought snowballs. The Fair opened so late in the year - trouble raising funds - but the powers finally decided they'd be worse off if they waited until the following year.

In a mood to splurge, Walt gave Vivian a choice of either a ride on the Ferris wheel first, or a box of fairy floss. Vivian assured him, "People call it cotton candy now." Despite her endlessly condescending tone, Walt bought the confection. She needed sweetening.

Walt also gave her a handful of nickels to try her luck at the booths. He told her to be back in time for the Trapeze Act, scheduled to begin at dusk in the big tent. The poster showed people flying through the air, catching a bar or a fellow-flyer's receiving hand. They depended on timing and trust.

Walt killed time until then by watching the Ferris wheel turn. He laughed with those who screamed in the sky. They all made it safely to the ground, smiling - lovers walking arm in arm. A mother counted children incessantly "one, two, three, four," then walked a few steps, turned round and counted again, "one, two, three, four." Walt

thought she should tie them together.

Vivian saved her nickels, feeling it'd be easy to steal a stuffed bear or string of beads and then tell Walt of her winning. She strolled along a line of customers waiting to be examined in the Eugenics Building. The "Fittest Family Contest" had been popular for years. People filled out forms while they waited.

Questions asked about relatives' ages and illnesses, deaths and causes of death, special gifts or talents, and any physical, mental or temperamental defects. Those were the questions that made sense. The ones that seemed irrelevant were about place of birth, amount of education, occupation and the like.

The information could later be used as a sales technique, to say that the fittest family came from a particular place and enjoyed certain activities - making them fit due to outside influences rather than genetics. Regardless, it was for science, so people dutifully wrote their answers. Everything was tested, including dental health. Nothing left to chance. Apparently the more intimate examinations took place inside the building.

Outside, however, an assistant to the doctor moved

through the line testing infants. He passed a coin in front of their tiny faces. If the child's gaze followed the coin, he or she was marked normal. If not, an imbecile.

Vivian watched carefully behind the shoulder of the thin white coat covering the cold man. She remembered her own children - so easily distracted.

This fad had swept the nation. Imbeciles had to be sterilized by child bearing age. Apparently, anyone could qualify. Any defect, any queer anatomy, or a single drop of Negro blood. So many undesirables plaguing the planet - how ever did we manage to this point? Also, unproductive people living on charity were ill equipped for a healthy society. Traits of the reprobate, the feebleminded and the epileptic needed to be erased - otherwise, humanity might breed itself back to the monkey.

Naturally, anyone holding differing views of our origins fell under suspicion of having underdeveloped minds. Weakness of character could be inherited from alcoholics, suicides and the sexually promiscuous. These were all noted.

Vivian wondered how honest anyone would answer in a

contest. Who, for instance, would mark the box next to Moral Deficiency? This is why, in the interest of accuracy, the Eugenics Records Office existed in its official capacity outside of State and County Fairs - so people could practice the wholesome and patriotic pastime of reporting their neighbor's beady eyes, trouble with math, or other bad behavior.

Vivian's mother had often assured her offspring, "Look at your father's brow - you're English!" Even though his people were sharecroppers, they were full-blooded Englishmen. On the other hand, Vivian's mother had olive skin with black-as-tar hair. With those high cheek bones, many people thought she had Indian mixed in her making. Her family didn't discuss it, but the rumor mill spoke of Black Irish also.

Compulsory sterilization. Certainly, all the faithful followers of heartless science could not escape. Vivian couldn't decide what kind of defect 'heartlessness' should be filed under: physical or mental. Hopefully no one saw her struggle with that question. They might mistake her expression for some sort of incompetence.

Physical traits, they said, reveal mental capabilities

- or lack thereof. True, a state of confusion could be seen on the face. Only those brilliant enough to successfully conceal their confusion were thought fit. But in that case, not only were they in truth confused, but dishonest as well. All smoke and mirrors. Sleight of hand. Carnival tricks. Just Carney-people in lab coats. Vivian grew angry.

The doctor's assistant frowned at some contestants and then seemed positively giddy with others, even ogling their fit physiques. What nerve - being so unscientific. The data weren't in yet. Still, this bloke had his mind made up before looking at their questionnaires - and long before noting whether infants took interest in coins. These papers, these forms, with all their silly questions, made Vivian mad - not madhouse mad, but the kind of mad where one takes action.

Vivian studied, and diagnosed, the assistant. A fine-tuned machine with well-heeled mannerisms, pleasantries and excellent bones. A walking advertisement for all that is good, godly and right with humanity - yet without heart. He would lose points for that. And not smart enough to know of his own deformity! Others had been nabbed for that same

"lack of insight" since they didn't admit their illness. Vivian did the math and found the assistant wanting.

Her thoughts wandered to Walt. In his own quiet way, he cared about everyone. Walt had heart, even though he couldn't read, and one ear was missing a bite. Vivian regretted that - and had baked him a pie after.

But what would science say about Walt? This made Vivian's blood excessively warm, and the more she thought about it, the hotter she got. She boiled. Who would dare to think lowly of Walt - who worked hard and kept his promises - a man who bought her gifts, believed her lies, and had the patience of a saint. Unbelievable patience. Legendary, godlike patience.

The last time someone slighted Walt, it was merely a matter of eye-rolling. A woman did this as Walt spoke of his job in the marble quarry. The bitch shouldn't have asked him if she didn't want the answer. At that picnic, Vivian turned toward the trees and slipped her finger up her nose, retrieving discharge, then rolled it round and round into a ball of justice and dropped it into the woman's drink. Vivian alone has license to despise Walt - not polished picnicking turds who thought themselves too

classy for pickaxe work.

Vivian came to her senses, surprised that she had let herself get all worked up over a fiction. Nobody at the Fair had yet insulted Walt. Still, she would keep him away from this building. It'd be just like Walt to enter a contest, thinking it'd be fun. Good thing he couldn't read the sign. There could be no second prize in a 'who's the fittest' game. One winner, and multitudes of losers.

Vivian would have never stopped at this building if she couldn't read. Being uneducated but still happy seemed so unlikely - but Walt did seem happy and gave her all his nickels. All he wanted in the world was to see that Flying Trapeze Act.

She imagined they'd sit there on the boards and eat popcorn. He'll try to hold her hand. He also wanted that. In this mood Vivian felt she might even let him. At that moment she was against the swells, and the swells were against Walt. But the day was still young. Things changed.

A well-groomed graying man in white emerged from the building. "Next." A large family entered after a young couple bouncingly emerged from the building. Hand in hand,

a skip in their step, the youthful pair came excitedly to a bench near Vivian. They opened their carbon copy of the completed Entry Form to see their grades. He: an "A." She, a "C."

Vivian watched the man's expression of bliss turn to concern. He tried to conceal his feelings, but his love obviously dimmed. No words, no explanations, no pleas could help. Vivian followed the couple, but didn't have to strain to hear. It was a long and loud, mostly one-sided conversation.

The girl spoke dismissively of a pesky trip to a sanatorium for much needed rest. There, she received the popular diagnosis of hysteria. Doctors wouldn't let her leave until she quit concealing her thoughts. Laughing nervously, she confessed to her betrothed, "So I stopped 'resisting,' and invented a traumatic event for them to cure. All we did was talk. Then I said I felt better. They took the credit and let me go. It was crazy. Them, I mean - not me."

Vivian witnessed the utter destruction of their relationship on the Paradise Carousel. The couple left their seats on the swan chariot and split company over the

monkey, rising high then low on its crank. The man abandoned the ride as the girl shouted after him that her people were not to be blamed for dying young. It was a shipwreck, and she had been shoved into the arms of strangers on a lifeboat. Not their fault! Not a disorder.

The young man's mind could not change again. Better people would have found a way to survive. Everything changed when he saw her report card: "C" - only 81-87 percent. He wasn't even certain he could bear it if she'd gotten a "B." How could he kiss her again - let alone have children with her? Inferior. Not good breeding stock. Their offspring could turn out to be hideous monsters. He left her standing with the whirling merriment behind. That fit man would write his family - his stable family - and tell them he'd quit the engagement. They would never think of dying young.

Once painfully aware of the irreconcilable rejection, the woman unleashed a torrent of tears, tearing her hair, stomping, and oh, the insults - words Vivian had never heard. Excellent lung power and a first rate pitching arm. Vivian felt that this young woman could do better than an "A" man anyway. Sadly, the poor dear would probably fill

her pockets with stones and drown herself in a futile attempt to make her man regret, remember, and long for her forever. Such a waste of fire.

Vivian entertained a passing thought to save the admirable woman by drowning the man, but chose another way to champion young love's cause. She searched the bushes for where the hysteric threw that engagement ring, and made plans to visit the doctor. Yes. . . how dare he.

Vivian returned to the Eugenics Building. The line was just as long, full of people trying to prove their worth. Their enthusiasm made her nauseous. Didn't they know that all the booths at the Fair were rigged? This one was no different. What would become of them all? Would husbands leave wives? Would mothers drown their children out of mercy - trying to prevent their inevitable execution for future crimes, or to prevent starvation due to their stupidity?

Science proved beyond a shadow of doubt that the future was bleak - at least for some - yet it dreamed of a brave new world, good for others. Still, how much bravery was needed to step on a bug? Imagine. A custom-made world where no one has need, so no one lent a hand.

Here at the Fair, Vivian saw the dream coming true. Smiling people sheepishly stood in line for slaughter. How much more blissful can we become? Yes, science drooled weak-kneed for the dream - as if tweaking genetic constitutions could bring happiness.

Truly, it would only bring security to the inbred frightened few. Those high-brows hid behind high walls. They should at least have suspected that they only survived because their cooks and gardeners allowed it day after day after day.

The graying doctor opened the door again. A family descended the steps smiling, clutching their yet unopened report card. This time, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I simply must beg your indulgence. My assistant is on an errand. Please come back in one hour."

Frustrated, the line of befuddled sheep ambled off, wandering without a shepherd. They would stampede back, eager to hand over an entry fee and be told their worth.

Chapter 28 - The Fittest

The genetics doctor posted a notice on the door before retreating inside for his break. "Closed until 3:00." Gingerly, Vivian ascended the steps and saw him pull shades on the windows. Grasping the knob, quiet as a mouse, only the door creaked on its hinges as she stepped inside. The snake sat at his desk and peeled a sandwich out of a noisy waxed paper wrapper. He apologized, "We're closed."

Vivian locked the door and smiled seductively. "I can read." She sashayed to his desk and saw his brain shifting gears. The man did not protest. Pulling a seat closer to the opposite side of his desk, she leaned forward with one elbow on a stack of books - fingers twirling slowly through her hair. "I thought I'd come and have my head examined." Then she pointed to the Psychograph machine.

Putting the sandwich onto its wrapper the man pleasantly returned the grin. "Step right this way."

Vivian sat beneath the contraption while the doctor lowered metal rings over her like a hat. Its probes measured bumps on her head before producing a ticker-tape personality report - checking the hygiene of the mind.

Working a few buttons loose on her dress, Vivian said she hoped a medical man could cure heat. As far as she could gauge, his fluids nearly boiled over as he stood over her to adjust the machine. Soon, Vivian's moral and intellectual propensities were scientifically determined. Just as she suspected: nothing abnormal.

The doctor assured her, "Phrenology has fallen out of favor in some countries - but what do they know? I find it to be highly successful."

Vivian raised an eyebrow and thought, "For what he's charging, I'll bet it is."

But the man did not ask Vivian for money. Gently, he led her back to his desk, patting her hand. "You're fit as a fiddle and should have many children. Otherwise, our kind could vanish."

Vivian thumbed through pamphlets and coyly questioned the doctor's intentions. "What do you want, doctor - scientifically speaking." She let the pamphlets fall from her fingers while keeping her gaze fixed on the doctor.

He hesitated and smiled cautiously before answering. "We work the Fairs everywhere, but especially where people stubbornly cling to the past. Wyoming, for example,

Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. Other states surrounding this area are on board - bless them - doing their part to strengthen the species. Lawmakers who vote against us are no doubt unfit as well. It's a pervasive problem."

Vivian noticed an autographed photo on the desk. The doctor puffed like billows, quite proud. "That's Harry Laughlin. I met him at a Breeding Conference some years back. Now, all of Europe is abuzz about our goals. Germany is quite enthusiastic. They've taken Laughlin's model and already sterilized more of their citizens faster than we're able. That's shameful when you think about it."

Vivian surveyed the rest of the dark desk - looking for something sharp.

Words flowed as if the doctor were reading his pamphlets. "Farmers and ranchers enjoy much success breeding their stock. The weak should not be allowed to reproduce."

Vivian leaned back and crossed her legs. She thought of the winter her family traveled to a Stock Show in Denver. Babies were undressed and judged as an event - just like animals. The best bred baby got a blue ribbon and was displayed on the parade grounds surrounded by cheering

crowds.

"Doesn't natural selection weed out the weak on its own? Isn't that what 'natural' means?"

The doctor seemed annoyed. "Sometimes nature needs a little help. Change is so slow."

Vivian leaned forward again and picked up the man's sandwich. "But can't the strongest male get the strongest female - all of them if he wants - without science?"

Taking a bite, she leaned back again, noting his expression: amused, and hungry. She didn't particularly care for pickles on ham, but found this thoroughly delicious. She licked her lips.

The man swallowed hard and stammered. "Well-born men such as myself must spread our seed everywhere we can, without moral restraint - which amounts to religious nonsense anyway. Only wives complain - exposing an underdeveloped character in the female." The doctor waited for a reaction, as he knew that many women tended to become irate when hearing criticisms of their sex. Vivian didn't even flinch.

This man talked when he was nervous. He continued mechanically, "Two billion people fighting for resources.

There's only enough pieces of the pie to support the very best."

Vivian finished the doctor's sandwich, and then licked her fingers while he rambled on about Darwin and the struggle that the 'preferred races' win. He looked over the materials on his desk and mentioned, "If you've got the time I could have your pedigree charted. It's a fascinating process. And, you may be interested in Dr. Jordon's book, *The rearing of the human thoroughbred.*" He turned the book to show her the cover but she purposely refused to let her gaze follow - even though he might think her an imbecile. The book wasn't shiny enough.

Thoroughbreds, Vivian shuddered. She felt like Phar Lap, the small Red Terror from Australia that beat all odds, winning race after race against thoroughbreds - and proved an embarrassment to the powers. So they poisoned him. Vivian shook her sanguine mane and pawed the floor with her shoe - a race horse eager to bolt at the gate. She needed to be finished with the doctor by three o'clock. Moving her hands tenderly over her breasts, she flicked crumbs onto the floor, and continued after all crumbs were gone. She purred, "Science is certainly exciting."

"Yes, because. . ." The man lost his train of thought, but soon recovered. He had riveted himself to the goal years ago and chatted up his program like a broken record. "Best for society to cut out disease, like one would do with a tumor. Don't you agree?" He smiled and stared intently at Vivian's fingers, which made her breasts bounce.

"Oh, I do agree, doctor. Cut the problems out for good." Vivian spied the scissors and letter opener standing erect amongst pencils. They graced a tin can brightly decorated with buttons and bric-a-brac.

"My son made that. Eugene. I named him after the program. Eugenics actually means 'well-born'."

"I know what it means. But who decides who is well or not well?"

"People who are well decide." Distracted, he focused on Vivian's legs, crossing and uncrossing. She played with the hem of her dress at the knee - locking her attention on the doctor's temperature. Hot blood rose to flush his face red - overheating. His color contrasted sharply to the whiteness of his coat. White - representing cleanliness. Purity. This man betrayed much, and hadn't a clue about

greatness.

Chomping at the bit, Vivian tried to control her heat, pulsing with fury. "I heard of a case a few years back. A young girl. Went all the way to the Supreme Court."

"Landmark case. Carrie Buck. Bold decision. Chief Justice Holmes - a fine American - said, 'Three generations of imbeciles are enough.' Where would we be today without such forward thought?"

"But I heard Carrie made the honor roll. And so did her daughter before she fell ill last year. So they were not morons. They were just poor."

The doctor became cranky. "That was an illegitimate child, exposing hypersexuality in the parent. It's a hereditary trait."

"But her foster family raped her."

"Never proven."

"Then they dumped her in an institution."

"Well, what else were they to do?" The doctor wondered whose side Vivian was really on and gave his visitor an odd look. The flush in his face worsened, but for reasons Vivian did not want. She had to bring him back. Power failure was imminent if she didn't keep him

talking.

"Let's not quarrel, doctor." Standing, Vivian ran hands down hips to straighten her dress, and the doctor's eyes followed her every move. "But aren't there exceptions to breeding rules? Like Einstein. Born to a featherbed maker. And Shakespeare's father made gloves."

The man of science rattled, "The world needs sound craftsmen. We just help them love their abysmal situation so they don't revolt. We entertain them, and drugs work best. Religion just gets them riled - that's being phased out. Education will be their new god, and that is to be put on the proverbial slippery slope, systematically given a shove. People won't compare their education to that of their grandparents because old ways are condemned. So they'll believe, and madly insist, they're truly educated. Again, content, docile and manageable. Brilliant, yes?"

Vivian almost betrayed herself as she reacted slightly to his words. The doctor noticed. He began to guess he'd gotten his wires crossed regarding the lady's intentions. Shifting in his seat he looked at the time.

Vivian shook her skirt to remove imaginary crumbs, giving the man a needed surge of energy to stay on task.

"Doctor, I'm most interested in your views on putting people out of their misery."

"In extreme cases, of course, quite necessary. Euthanasia. It means good death."

Vivian knew what it meant, and maneuvered the corners of his desk like a gentle breeze, switching her body in time with the ticking clock - time, which slowed as the man watched a fine specimen of womanhood approach. Her fingertips caressed the ornaments glued tight to the tin can. She turned one more corner, coming fully into view, and stopped walking when her knees met his. "What about incorrigible behavior?"

The doctor breathed heavily and labored to remember his training. "Lobotomy works wonders." Vivian wove his hair through her fingers, derailing his train again. He concentrated hard. "A controlled population . . .unable to rebel." He cleared his throat. "The primates at Yale have had parts of their brains removed - became docile - but retained intelligence and skills. We're getting close to separating human emotion from thought."

Vivian felt they were closer than they thought, since she had already diagnosed him as cold, unfeeling and

heartless. "And this will make people happy?"

"Well, they just won't care about what used to make them happy. Regardless, they'll no longer be a trouble to society." Her fingers gently slid across the doctor's lips. He stuttered a bit: "Some say this interest began when an Irishman blew an iron rod through his brain before the War between the States. He survived for a dozen years, but his personality changed. Soon, we'll perfect the procedure. It'll become commonplace. Amazing isn't it? The knife that destroys is the knife that restores reason."

Vivian petted circles round the doctor's ears, yet he continued breathlessly, "Mercury causes a partial lobotomy. Think of it. Creating new, different species, vaccinating them from destructive ways. Peaceful. Serene service."

Vivian's masterful moves made the man nervous. He kept talking with a quick pace, "You can help with your vote?"

"Absolutely, doctor." Vivian whispered while removing his glasses. She put a little English on it, letting them tumble onto the desk. She tapped a finger onto the tip of his nose. "You'll work yourself out of a job. With the lower crust gone, the upper crust drops, and eventually

becomes the lowest."

He chuckled, "Clever girl."

"What would be left of the old species? I suppose the last two doctors on earth could sterilize each other. And if they got irritable they could flip a coin for who gets the lobotomy."

The doctor laughed, "You're delightful." He slid his hand round her hip.

Vivian twisted and sat on his papers. Scootching back, one hip at a time, she wiped her ass with his files. This caused a few books, charts and the pencil holder to tumble. The doctor didn't care. Once comfortable, the toe of her shoe slipped between his legs. The man smiled broadly.

With one knee raised high, Vivian lifted her chin higher and wrapped his tie round and round her hand, gently tugging. She brought the back of her other hand to her brow, movie star style, and looked skyward.

Breathlessly she whimpered, "Doctor, I'm afraid I may not be morally sound." Leaning back on her hand, she waved her knee in his face. The chair squeaked to and fro.

The doctor thrilled. "I'll have to examine you

further." Gliding his hand along the incline of her shin, he rounded her calf and followed the angle of her knee. He fumbled with her garter on a soft bare thigh. It was then that Vivian yanked him forward on his silken leash as she pressed the scissor point to his throat. "I give you a 'D' - for dumb."

Suddenly at a loss for words, the doctor's face paled. A simple tool had become a stopcock. Vivian hoisted him closer. "There's only one difference between you and me. You want rid of the wrong people."

Beads of cold sweat formed on his brow. "I have money. I have - what do you want?"

"Yes, I'll take your money. My surgeon's fee. Gotta cut out what's wrong." Vivian found herself talking - always a mistake. It allowed time for the target to think.

"Have pity. Please, have mercy."

"I'm strong and you're weak. Say it."

The doctor sputtered. "Yes, yes. . . I'm weak. You're strong." His chin quivered like a leaf about to blow away. A tiny droplet of blood oozed out of the prick where flesh caved, enveloping the scissor tip. Vivian didn't let it slide all the way, wanting to tease him a bit

longer.

"Are you unfit?"

"What do you want?"

She tugged on his tie, driving the point deeper.

He cried, "Yes, I am unfit."

"Fine." Vivian whispered again in a low snarl. "Out of my superiority, I will forgive."

The doctor recognized the echo of his hero Nietzsche coming from the temptress. A tiny spark of hope flashed within his eye. Hope and untamed fury. He could see himself overtake her in this moment of forgiveness - of weakness. He imagined she would cry. He would then enjoy watching the white coated men drag her into a wagon - wheeled off to confinement, committed to the madhouse, sterilized and alone. Alone, but not forgotten. He would remember her, and visit often to privately check her progress. So many necessary examinations. No lobotomy for her though. He wanted to hear her beg for a good death.

Vivian saw the spark of his hope, plans laid out in bloody blueprint. Still, she let his tie slip loose. It unraveled from her wrist like a corkscrew. She ordered, "Kiss me," and switched the scissor into her right hand,

leaning back on her left.

A beastly growl escaped the doctor's throat as soon as the tie dropped like a plumb line pointing to his power. In one swift movement he sprung from his chair, slapping her leg away. He seized her fist holding the scissors and reached for her other hand - but it found him instead.

Chuckling beneath her breath, Vivian watched his expression change from triumph to astonishment and he suddenly knew everything. He had been right - destroying restores reason. Vivian pierced his side with the letter opener, shoving it to the hilt. He had used that instrument often to open letters from so many well-intentioned folk happily reporting their neighbors for being different. Now she used it to jimmy him open and made a note for his report: poor health.

Blood poured over her fingers warmly. Putting her foot into his belly she shoved him back into his seat. The chair reclined and wheeled to the wall, letting out a long, submissive squeal. The man could only gasp and gurgle.

Vivian quickly straddled the doctor and wedged her knees between his sides and the arms of the chair. Raring back, she pounded his chest with her fists, savagely

burying both weapons with each blow. The chair bucked and rolled a jerking dance pattern with Vivian in the lead. It may have been her rage, but for the most part he felt hollow. Only the man's ribs resisted. And Vivian again thought she heard angels singing.

Eventually, she tired. Out of breath, Vivian listened to the ticking clock and bustle of life beyond the Eugenics Building. Tossing the bloody weapons onto his papers, she went through his pockets. A wallet, but no car keys. The wedding ring slipped off easily - greased with blood. She took his time piece with a fine chain, thinking someday she'd give it to Walt when he became particularly frustrated.

Vivian went to the sink for a good scrubbing. There, the clear water diluted the doctor's well-bred blood and swooshed it down the drain. She remembered ancient taunts endured in school over her accent - the one left over from some immemorial old country. Born talking good, Vivian learned how to speak well - now fluent in both languages. They teased her for "worshing" instead of washing, and going to the "liebarry" instead of the library. People seemed more tolerant of the recent foreigners who couldn't

be understood at all.

The bad seed bleeding across the room feebly gestured with his hands that hung loosely across the arms of his chair. He made many gurgling noises that Vivian barely heard over the water. Even when his train ran out of track, he was hard to bring full stop. Maybe he would never die.

Vivian "worshed" her face next, and then ran water over the shiny payments for tumor extraction - before putting them into her pockets. She turned her attention to a spare lab coat - white as snow. Its cleanliness could cover her blood-smeared dress.

Keeping one eye on the man's progression toward eternal justice, Vivian walked over to the tall beakers and glass tubes filled with mysterious potions. Stinking secrets. She stood over the doctor who now droned a deep note, a record slowing - trying to shut down. Pouring the stink over his desk she then trailed a circle round to his chest and finished with a good dousing of his legs. He winced ineffectually. Tears leaked from his eyes and pooled in his ears.

Drawing close to his face, Vivian whispered, "I've got

good reason." Speaking distinctly she repeated, "I've got good reason. Say it." The doctor did not speak - his pipes were clogged. Blood backed up and choked his words, but his lips trembled automatically.

It's a well known fact that scientists repeatedly prove each other wrong. It might be a stretch to say they're full of shit all the time, but they do keep correcting themselves while insisting that they know. A depreciable field. Like last year's model of car - so easily replaceable. Vivian observed the doctor's struggle and wondered whether he could be objective about his situation. He had spent his life relying solely on his senses, but now he needed a miracle.

Vivian saw him make a mental note - perhaps of a sudden wish to believe in more than readily sensed objects? Or perhaps he wanted to jot down a reminder of the microscope, invented over three centuries prior, that allows observation of tiny creatures - previously invisible. They existed nonetheless, despite vast ignorance and arrogance. Perhaps a tinker could invent a new contraption allowing observation of big objects existing beyond our limited senses - existing though

invisible. Would the specimen wonder? Would he wish it were so?

Vivian watched him try to lift himself out of his chair, but he hadn't the strength. She lit a match and put it to the papers. A fine experiment. Would the odorous liquids retard and extinguish the flame - or help the little spark better itself, reaching glorious, dreamed-of heights? The blaze overtook the desk with a grateful roar. Such heat - reminding Vivian of the cement fire pit that she was held over as a child for the sake of high humor.

Using Dr. Jordon's book, and others like it, Vivian slid burning files onto the doctor's legs. Papers curled and blackened beneath the orange and blue hues, offering a scent skyward. Bolting from the heat she left him with one last bit of advice to complete his education. "Just a touch of hell, doc. No better time to repent."

A flash of remorse hit Vivian - just a tiny moment when she believed she'd made a mistake. Yes, it would have been better to doctor the files and give everyone an "A-plus." Too late. She slipped away from the pyre wearing her surgeon's disguise of purity. Mixing within the balloon carrying crowd and clowns, folk surmised Vivian's

worth because of the white smock. Enthusiastically, they shook her hand. "I admire your work."

Others bubbled with joy. "Our future depends on you."

They waved their blessings. "God's speed."

With smoke beginning to follow her from beneath the doorway, Vivian did have reason to hurry.

Chapter 29 - Clarity

Walt sat on a stump watching the Ferris wheel. It thrilled people in circles: backwards up, and forward down. He especially enjoyed watching mothers with children, holding the little hands of wide-eyed tots. He thought of his own, who never got to walk or say their first word.

Walt stood when Vivian approached, letting her sit. Motioning toward her coat, he asked, "Where'd you get that?"

"Won it at the Ring Toss."

Screams came from the other side of the Fair, where smoke rolled above the trees. "Stay here, Viv." Walt ran to the area, where a thick crowd gathered. Buckets and caps full of water were already being hauled from the Kiddie Boat Float ride. The wooden structure was gutted and the roof had caved. People doused nearby structures to save them. The sign offering a prize to the fittest family peeled and blackened. Walt saw a woman struggle with a heavy bucket of water. He took it from her and gave her his cap. Cries about the doctor raced through the crowd - the poor doctor. Where was he?

Walt's heart sank. He stopped, only to be shoved out of the way by others busy fighting fire. He may have seemed unable to think straight, but in that stunning moment Walt was filled with clarity. A doctor missing. Vivian's new white coat. There could be no more denial. The thought shook him. His body tightened and trembled. With his eyes shut tight he saw his wife clearly for the first time. He had always maintained a comforting shadow of doubt - that thin wisp of a shadow stood between a moment ago and now. For better or for worse. This was the worst part. Walt knew he'd always known. He had managed to look the other way just enough to not know. The heat of it burned him.

Shouts and cries darted from the crowd. Smoke and flames roared like a hungry beast - yet it all faded into a dim-sounding, slow-moving blur for Walt. He walked away, searching, and finally found the Ring Toss. Prizes there were cakes and cookies wrapped in handkerchiefs tied with ribbon. Smoke stung his eyes, but Walt saw, and it broke his heart. Now he knew why his uncle used to take his spectacles off whenever possible. He'd say, "The world looks better this way."

Walt turned from the crowd, his face a blazing red. Vivian saw him in the distance, appearing out of the smoke and commotion. His stooped and heavy steps told her that he was absorbed in thought. A troubled look. Sadness and fear. Pain. Sliding the coat from her shoulders, Vivian wadded it into a ball and shoved it deep inside a waste bin by the Fun House mirrors. She would explain her bloodied dress by blaming a nose bleed. She no longer believed Walt would later try to hold her hand. Just then she wondered whether workers left their money behind booth barriers when they ran to tend the fire. No time. Walt had a strange look on his face.

"Ring Toss gives away cakes."

"I must of gotten the last c -."

Walt stopped her with a menacing glare. His piercing look came with startling force. Her normally predictable husband was asking more questions these days. Walt's temperament always had a slow-burn point, and here he was - finally smelling of smoke.

He growled shakily, "What have you done?"

Vivian pulled the shiny watch from her dress pocket and held it gently in her palm, covering her tender

splinter.

"Not about him. About the babies!" Walt twisted with labored groans, "God forgive me." He hurried into the field of cars, remembering all her little gifts that she mysteriously acquired over the years. Vivian followed him, but within a few rows of vehicles, Walt stopped and spun on his heels, looking larger than usual. He fixed his eyes on his wife, who still held her peace offering. The chain swung violently beneath her hand as she stopped short of bumping into him. Walt's words trembled, "I want nothin' of that. Whatever you done, you don't make me part of it." He thrust a finger at her heart, "It'll never be said I took what don't belong to me. Get rid of it." He turned to walk away.

"I found it."

Vivien smelled dirt and felt the grass swipe across her face as she fell. Thinking backwards quickly, she realized what happened. She had spun mid-flight when her feet left the ground - Walt's fist flew toward her - his expression narrowed as he turned. She hadn't seen it coming.

Back in the moment, Vivian's blood freckled the blades

of grass as she exhaled. Still sputtering, she didn't have time to think of a proper response. This was so new. Walt picked her up by her hair and ripped the time piece from her wrist without bothering to untangle it first. It skimmed the top of a few cars before landing on a Packard. With her hair in his fist, Walt led his wife briskly through the field toward town.

Passersby became involved. "There's no cause for that, mister."

"Unhand her!"

Men removed their jackets and pursued. Walt was a head taller than most men. He outweighed them too - all muscle - since he had never had a soft job. His steps quaked through the brush. With every breath Vivian's nose dotted the air and her rescuers as well. Between breaths, her blood flowed freely down her face with a fast beating pulse, mixing with the doctor's blood on her dress. Vivian clung to Walt's arm, trying to lift weight off her hair. Nails clawed him but he took no notice.

Walt fought off men with his free arm and used Vivian's body to batter them on the other side. They tore at his shirt and beat his back, flinging insults. "Brute!"

"Villain!" "Coward!"

Walt never let loose of her hair, even when her stumbling felled the men and brought her to her knees. He dragged her the rest of the way and threw her limp body on the steps of the boarding house. By then, there was a sizeable gathering of blood-spattered panting men - glad that Walt stopped. Women covered their faces from the horror.

"Shame! Shame!" They flung a few stones.

Walt batted a few away but mostly ignored them. His eyes stayed on Vivian as he tried to think of an insult, accusation or threat. He didn't have the words. Dizzied from the loss of blood, Vivian could not stand or climb the steps to their room. Her stockings hung in shredded strips below torn, bloody knees. One shoe had been picked up in the field and returned to her. Women came with handkerchiefs to stop the bleeding and steady Vivian for a walk down the street.

Walt remained standing. His chest heaved from the hurry and the hurt. Sweat and sadness filled his eyes, replacing the smoke that was there, but fury still snarled on his lips. The sun went down behind him, but Walt stood.

Being led down the street, Vivian strained her neck to see him, unable to avert her eyes. Never before had he looked so attractive.

Chapter 30 - Lewis

Flanked by an officer of the law and the local midwife, Vivian made her way through the predawn air toward hotel row. She held her puffy black eye high. No longer wearing the bloody dress that the stout midwife promised to clean, Vivian now wore a loaner from another woman who had helped her walk away from Walt the night before. Probably her dress couldn't be cleansed of stain anyway. The midwife was often called upon to help the local physician. So, Vivian's torn stockings were given to her to use holding bandages in place as needed.

Vivian didn't miss the stockings, and briskly thrust one bare leg in front of the other toward her hotel room. What she did miss were pockets on the dress. She had lifted a fountain pen from the officer's desk and stuffed it into her shoe. It pinched and everyone mistook the limp for the cuts and bruises she got while being dragged from the Fair the night before. Vivian sighed deeply. She couldn't abide a dress without pockets.

Walking down the hallway, the lawman reminded Vivian that he can bring Walt in for disturbing the peace if he

didn't behave, but roughing up his wife was a matter for family and clergy. He knocked sharply on the hotel room door. Walt had been preparing for work and answered the door half dressed. His bare chest bulged and flexed atop drooping trousers as suspenders swung loose against his lean hips. The yet unstrung boot lacings tapped the floor lightly as he stepped. Blocking the doorway with one forearm on the frame, he held the door with his other arm.

Walt looked over the team gathered in the dim hallway. His wife eyed him curiously, but the midwife's gasp morphed quickly into a scowl at the undressed sight. In front of God and everyone. The officer's hat cocked a bit to the side, but he lifted his chin and spoke. "Seems you and the missus had a bit of a scuffle last night. Broke her nose. Blood come on like a faucet."

Walt nodded slightly and glared at Vivian. She imagined he had tossed and turned all night wondering where she had been. Walt stated clearly, "She don't need help gettin' where she belongs."

The officer inserted firmly, "I'm just here to make sure everything's sorted out. And see if you've cooled off a bit."

Walt let the door swing wide as he turned his back to the group and shoved his arms angrily into shirt sleeves. The midwife gave Vivian a strong hug, then headed back down the hallway. The lawman caught Walt's eye before jabbing a warning finger. "Keep a lid on it, mister."

Vivian took a few steps forward into the room, eager to get out of her shoes. Her escort tipped his hat to her and followed the midwife out into the streets.

"You ate yet?" Walt asked Vivian while he laced his boots. He did not expect an answer and didn't get one. The sun had yet to peek above the prairie, so Walt assumed she had not. Vivian sat on a side chair and rubbed her foot - leaving the pen in her shoe for the time being. Then she crossed her legs and arms gruffly, tightly. Walt announced, "I'll get us a bite. I reckon you don't care what happens to the two of us." He stuffed his shirt tails into his pants and said more softly, "I gotta hurry 'fore my ride leaves without me. But we are gonna talk 'bout that Fair. I figure you set that fire. With a man inside."

"He attacked me."

"Did Rena attack you, too?"

Vivian grit her teeth.

"There's somethin' wrong with you, Viv. I ain't crossed you before, but this has got to stop. They're likely gonna hang you someday."

Walt left the hotel room and flung his suspenders up onto his shoulders with a snap before he reached the stairs. Cool air hit him as he entered the street, but the café door was just a few steps away. He saw a scrawny kid with a wagon in tow who parked under the awning outside the curtained café windows. His wagon hauled a crate full of squirming chocolate brown puppies.

Now Walt always had a soft spot for dogs and knew a puppy could keep Vivian company while he worked. It might also keep her busy at home. Hopefully might even soften her up a bit. "What you want for 'em?"

The boy pointed shyly to his sign, bringing no response from Walt other than a shrug. The boy then answered, "Okay, a nickel then, mister. If they ain't gone by supper my pa says he'll eat 'em."

Walt figured the boy's pa would just sack the lot and let a river take them. But he didn't tell the boy. Nobody tolerates a man sticking his nose where it doesn't belong,

contradicting other men where his kids were concerned. Walt rubbed the boy's head and smiled. "Pick me out a happy one by the time I come outta here." The boy smiled wide and offered thanks through several missing teeth.

Inside the café, Walt bought two breakfasts and also got a big soup bone for the dog. He knew the nickel to be the one with an Indian on its backside. He gave one to the grinning boy, who handed up a wiggly, chubby puppy with a white blaze between its eyes. The little tail wagged and a tiny pink tongue licked Walt's hands as it tried to climb up his chest and got paws wrapped round the suspenders. Walt did well to balance his food apart from the wild ball of motion, and got Vivian to open the door after giving it a few slight kicks.

Walt had figured right. Vivian's practiced grimace softened immediately upon sight of the puppy. Her brow lifted and her lips parted, turning up at the ends. She took the puppy in her hands and held it up to her nose for a good look. Full of energy, the puppy wriggled and tried to lick her. Vivian turned her back against Walt in hopes that he hadn't seen her joy. She nuzzled the pup and brought it close to her bosom. She held it tight.

Walt figured the dog to be part apology and part Christmas present. "Got a bone here to keep it happy."

"I'll name him Lewis." Vivian darted a haughty look at Walt, who only sighed. He already half-expected her to name the dog after that damned sailor she's been waiting for near over a decade to come after her.

Walt grabbed his jacket and bit off a big hunk of sausage, then he fed the puppy a small piece. "Be back at sundown." He ate his fried egg sandwich as he left the room, hurrying to meet Eli in the alley. In the hallway, Walt spied newspapers left at a few of the other doors. He stooped to pick one up for the puppy's leavings and figured he'd make it right with the occupants later. The picture on the front page was of the burning Eugenics Building. Walt swung his door open swiftly and tossed the newspaper on the bed. He left again just as quick, but his heart warmed when he caught sight of Vivian smiling over the antics of the puppy. A broad smile - like the sun had come out.

Vivian, jolted by the surprise of Walt's abrupt reentry, continued to lie across the bed letting the puppy slide across her belly. She felt glad to again hold a

little one, and she missed her own babies. Lewis reveled in Vivian's attention. She stroked his soft rolls of fur and fondly remembered the last dog she owned, named Cindy.

Cindy had become payment for a summer's work on Lewis' family farm. Vivian's father sent her there in her fifteenth year. As he often reminded her: "Nothin' like hard work to sweat the devilment out of young people."

Vivian did many odd jobs on that farm - mostly for Lewis' father, Mack. For a month she helped dig a basement out from beneath his house. It involved dirty, hard and heavy shoveling mingled with backbreaking wheelbarrow work. The sweat poured from her like salty rain. Neighbors even called the police on him for violating child labor laws. That investigation included some private words and hearty back-slapping with Mack, followed by the passing of a liquored flask before the officers drove away.

Lewis climbed over his soup bone, lovingly licking at it as it rolled on the floor with him. The bone was every bit as big as the dog. This delighted Vivian as she watched him play - but it also reminded her that one person's fun is another person's folly. She recalled how Mack quite nicely asked her to hold a fence wire down so he

could step over. It wasn't but a foot or two off the dewy ground, but she did as she was asked - only to learn that it was electrified. The fence bit her. She squealed and stumbled backward to the ground.

For further entertainment, Mack asked Vivian to take a saucer of milk out to the field for his pet skunk. He said he liked to keep that skunk because it ate the mice. Vivian climbed the fence and gingerly walked out to the field, taking care not to spill any milk. Mack's wife ran along the fence line yelling, "Don't you do it, girl!" Mack laughed and yelled "go" while his wife screamed "stop" - causing Vivian and the skunk both to become a bit frantic.

Vivian put the milk down on the ground several feet from the skunk, and then ran. She didn't know a skunk's spraying range. Odor on the wind doesn't last long, but the actual scent - if it gets on you - seems to last forever.

Vivian escaped back to the fence, where the wife repeatedly but vainly flung her fists at her husband, which made him laugh all the more. Later that night the woman helped Mack's itchy back by getting what she called a

special ointment - which was nothing but alcohol. She ran and hid while his back burned him into a crazy state. But it did kill the itch.

Vivian shook her head at how gullible she used to be and how much she learned from her time on that farm. She scratched behind Lewis' ears and kissed the puppy before taking him over to Walt's tub of cold bath water for a drink. She giggled as he pawed the water with all fours, trying to find sure footing.

She lowered him belly deep, but he preferred to swim rather than drink. Letting her fingers slide from his slickened belly, Lewis struggled to keep his nose in the air. He paddled about the tub in circles, trying to climb the sides. But he couldn't.

On the farm, Vivian had tried to jump a creek that ran through the property - about four foot wide. It held all the sludge from the refinery upstream. A molasses-thick mess ran into that creek. Vivian didn't know how the grass stayed green along the banks. Of course, she fell in and disappeared beneath the gummy darkness. If it hadn't been for clumps of roots along the sides - loose as they were in the mud and muck - she wouldn't have been able to crawl

out.

The silver lining on that stinking day had been that Vivian felt positive that her specialty mail-order shoes, which she hated, were now ruined. Sadly, they washed up well enough to wear the next day. She would have to outgrow them - but she seemed fully grown already. Mack's wife took note of that fact and oversaw the binding of Vivian's breasts every day and made her wear oversized clothing. Vivian collapsed onto her bed each evening, exhausted from all the work - asleep before her head hit the pillow. She only took the time to unravel those bindings for relief before lying down.

Lewis, the handsome son of the farmer, came home on furlough - long enough for Vivian to fall in love. They secretly planned to marry. Vivian felt certain Lewis must truly love her since she looked hideous in the clothing her Bosses provided. He made the summer time fly by too quickly.

They were sweet days, filled with small talk and whispered nothings in each other's ears. Lewis meant everything to Vivian. Her thoughts were filled with him, and he seemed completely taken by her. He smiled like

sunshine, fueling her dark work hours with pleasant images to pass the time while they were apart.

The couple often snuck away to the swimming hole, lying in the sun, drying the sweat and water drops on their bodies while at the same time weaving wilted flowers they stuck in their hair. They climbed cottonwoods, and watched meadowlarks build their nests in small holes in the ground. The puppy that Lewis gave her was white and spotted, just like the meadowlark eggs. They spent every chance they could together. And tender promises were spoken.

Several mishaps occurred that summer that worried Vivian. She felt that Lewis' feelings might sour. She was to be given a permanent hair treatment - as the lady of the house was practicing her craft. She began to part Vivian's hair but noticed several tiny crawling critters along the scalp. She firmly ordered Vivian to sit and not move. Vivian must have sat there for an hour or so until the woman returned with a bottle from the druggist.

In her excitement, she didn't read the instructions, but simply poured the medicine over Vivian's head hung over the kitchen sink. Vivian howled madly. The lice died, but her scalp was raw. When the woman finally got Vivian

rinsed off and calmed down, she read the bottle and stated matter of factly, "Oh. It wants diluted first. Well, live and learn."

It wasn't much longer after that when her entire bottom side began burning after a visit to the outhouse. Lewis' mother then gasped and remembered she had washed the seating with lye, but had not yet rinsed it off. Vivian was put into a tub filled with several buckets of icy cold water. It felt wonderful, but it took the rest of the day to recover. She was seen walking carefully for several days thereafter. This amused Lewis, and he teased her - but she didn't mind. He wasn't laughing at her the way his father had done so often before.

Vivian was let to soak in the bath for long periods of time afterward. When his parents were doing chores, Lewis would go to the bathroom door and creak it open slowly. The first time he did this, Vivian's eyes flashed with panic. But she came to expect him and planned her bath time around his parent's chores. Then her eyes faithfully flashed a smile for him.

Such a painful but precious wet summer. Despite all she endured there, Lewis remained a shining bright spot

that summer. Their engagement didn't stay secret for long. Mack approved of the match. Vivian's father, on the other hand, wouldn't hear of it. He made plans to collect her from that farm as fast as his car could get him there.

Meanwhile, Mack wanted Vivian to work the tractor to tow another vehicle. She was familiar with all the workings of the tractor and its attachments. She'd plowed, raked and mowed. Mack hooked his green tractor to his old truck with a chain and Vivian pulled it up a hill to the windmill. She tried to stay ahead of him while he put it in gear. He held his foot on the clutch as the beast rolled down the long hill, chasing Vivian's ride. Mack tried to use the momentum to pop the clutch and turn the engine over, but it wouldn't cold start.

Once out on the flats Vivian stopped and Mack crawled underneath the truck. Vivian could see his legs sticking out. He asked her to drag it forward "just a nudge" while he was still under. She meant to ease forward until the chain snapped taut and then do as she was instructed without driving over Mack. But most tractors had clutches with a lot of play. This one was no different. The sloppy clutch made the tractor lunge forward four or five feet in

a rush.

The big truck bolted forward as well. Vivian held her breath and listened. She heard nothing from the old man. Only silence - quiet enough that she could hear her heart beating strong. Mack couldn't speak without swearing, having never uttered a clean sentence since she knew him. She waited for the barrage of insults to begin, but his silence told Vivian the worst had happened. She climbed down and walked to the house without looking back. Tearfully, Vivian told the wife what she'd done. Just then, old Mack stomped in and asked what the sam-hell was wrong with her. He was damned indignant that she had simply walked away from a job. He made himself more than clear.

Vivian blurted back, "Well, you wasn't swearin', so I figured you for dead." Mack led Vivian back out to the field while his wife laughed till she cried. Lewis wasn't there. He had heard Vivian's father was on his way to bring his daughter home.

Vivian watched her puppy struggle in the water. Occasionally he offered a random whimper. She ran her fingers through the water, which made him swim toward her,

but she withdrew her hand when he neared. Sitting on the bed's edge, Vivian watched little Lewis grow tired.

Before Vivian's father arrived to haul her home, she told Lewis she'd wait for him. He vowed he would come for her without fail - no matter what. "Come hell or high water," he said. And she waited. She wrote to him regularly but never got a response. She wrote and told him that her parents were set on making her marry another. But Lewis did not write. And he didn't come back.

Vivian ran her fingers deep in the tub water until she noticed that the splinter in her palm from the cross half a week before had nearly worked its way out. The realization came heavily. Lewis had not kept his promise. She had to surrender to the realization. He would not be coming for her.

The puppy sank into darker depths of water and came to rest on the bottom of the tub. Vivian sighed and looked toward the window where the shades had not been opened. Daylight had come and gone already, and Walt would be back shortly. She had spent the day loving and reloving Lewis but had finally let him go.

Part IV

"They must often change
who would be constant in happiness
or wisdom"

Confucius

Chapter 31 - Purging

It was late afternoon when Walt returned to the Inn. He found the door as he left it: unlocked. Vivian sat on the bed - looking exhausted, or heavy with thought. She sighed deeply as he closed the door, but otherwise took no notice of his arrival. Her sight seemed fixed on the wallpaper. Or farther.

Walt took a mug from the sideboard and bent over the tub water, scooping it to pour over his head and neck. Several small waterfalls fell from his crown back into the tub, blurring his reflection. Walt had his eyes mostly closed as he scooped a few more cups full - but soon he slowed and dropped the mug. It clanked loudly against the metal rim and crashed to the floor, breaking off the handle. Walt rubbed his face with his hands, and then used his shirttail. The water droplets still fell into the pool, making rings throughout. "Vivian. . . what hap. . ."

Walt put his hand gently on the surface, as if to calm the waters or to wipe away the rings. He soon could see clearly.

That's what he thought he saw. In the depth, the

puppy he'd gifted earlier that morning lay still on the bottom. His gut tightened and trembled in fury. His fists gripped the side of the tub to the point he nearly tipped it over. Reaching into the water, Walt lifted the animal out and turned toward his wife. Little Lewis lay lifeless in his hands. Water poured off his drenched fur. It washed Walt's boots and formed a puddle on the floor. Vivian hadn't moved from her place before the wallpaper.

Walt hurled the carcass at her - slapping the small of her back. Hard. She arched, and the puppy slid down to the bed with a muffled, wet thud. She jolted, but her back slowly relaxed into a tired slump. Otherwise, she remained unmoved.

Cold water slid down all three of their bodies now. Walt's words came out like rolling thunder. "What did you do?"

Her silence and her back would not save her this time. The room itself seemed to shake and shiver as Walt roared an accusation. "What'd you do to my children?"

Vivian turned slightly, as if straining to hear. She was taken aback by his sudden change of subject. But the subject was the same for Walt. She didn't respond quickly

enough, but soon sensed that Walt had moved - turning the corner of the bedpost. Coming at her. Fast.

She leapt to her feet but had nowhere to go, being between Walt and the wall. He grabbed what was left of her hair and fiercely yanked her head backwards with his left hand. This offered up her throat, but he covered it with his right. "Who is it you really want dead, woman?"

Vivian was up against the wall. She felt herself purging, not able to protect her self. She started talking: "I let Lewis go! He's gone now - and I can be a good wife for you, Walt. I know I can."

Walt flung her onto the bed before she finished her sentence. His hands fell to her many packages strewn about the room. He ripped them apart and threw the contents to the walls. It was as though he searched for something - anything to repair the damage she'd done. Mostly he wanted to destroy her.

His rampage slowed when he found the jewels, and his mother's hat pins in a pocket of her carpet bag. Those, and the broaches, impaled him several times as he dug inside the bag. He shook them off from wherever they stuck him. They flew to the walls with the rest of Vivian's

acquisitions. He hadn't expected such loot. Sputtering his words, Walt asked in short breaths, "Where'd you get all this?" She started to speak but he cut her off. "Men gave you this?" He corrected himself. "Men didn't give you all this."

Vivian wanted to return to the subject of Lewis. It was the only topic she'd rehearsed. Stunned, Walt asked her questions that he knew would not be answered. "Men just give you their goods for nothin'? Or leave 'em round to be found? And where'd this come from?" He squeezed her wrist in his fist, shoving the hysteric's ring toward Vivian's face. The prongs holding the sparkling stone dug deep into her cheek and across her jaw as she tried to wriggle her arm from his grasp. People had been saying for years that his wife got awful friendly with men who ended up dead. "Maybe I should ask just how healthy these folk are when you leave 'em?"

Vivian shot an indignant glare as her arm broke free. "None of 'em complained!"

Walt backhanded her hard across the face, and she fell back onto the bed. She began to crawl to the other side before the bed stopped bouncing - but Walt grabbed her hips

and dragged her back. He certainly was uncorked now, and pinned her down.

Walt recalled all the trinkets she'd mysteriously turned up with over the years - said she'd found. He assumed the worst about that, but demanded to know what happened to their children. In his search, Walt saw soft white diapers worn by them in their short lifetime. They were folded neatly and tucked into a corner of the bag. She kept three, and he let his fingers linger there, not daring to hope it means something - mean she had a sentimental streak that might surface and be sweet. He was tired of hoping and hearing her excuses. It was then that he found Skipper's plaster mask. "What the hell is this?"

Fear overtook Vivian. She didn't want him to throw the mask. Timidly, she reached for it but Walt moved away from her grasp. He turned it over and saw markings inside, written in loops and curlicues. And he saw the concern on his wife's face. The mask seemed oddly out of place among the jewels, loose cash and new clothes. It appeared to have no value in comparison, yet this was what got Vivian to reach out, pleading with her eyes.

"That's mine." Her voice was feeble. Begging.

Walt shook it at her. "Where'd you get this?"

His skin pricked and made him hate her. He felt thousands of tiny needles attack his nerves. The feeling reminded him of when Vivian "forgot" pins in his shirt she'd sown. Every move he made sliced him. When he threw sacks of potatoes over his shoulder at work, he was pierced. Every time he bent or sat, the pins along the hem tucked into his pants stabbed and ripped his flesh. Walt shivered and stepped back - he knew he'd bleed again if he stayed near her any longer. Yet he stood determined to get answers.

Years of festering anger raced through his veins. Walt smashed the mask against the corner of the sideboard - hitting it over and over. The sound could not be heard over Vivian's screams. She ran to the powdery shards, trying to scoop each particle to put it back together. Walt grabbed her by the back of her dress and flung her to the wall. Low and throaty, Walt demanded, "What did you say?"

While screaming, Vivian had called out Skipper's name. She looked at him through tears, and stuttered. "Skipper."

"You took up with another sailor?"

He didn't wait for another lie to fly. Grabbing her by the throat, Walt lifted her to a standing position with her back against the wallpaper. He didn't know what to make of her tears. Screaming over a plain Mardi Gras mask. Her battle-style was always that of a saboteur, quietly undermining whatever he built. She had never been moved to show emotion other than rage - and over something so worthless. Perhaps she had gone mad, reliant on spectacle now. People had said before that she was possessed by an evil spirit - like Al Capone in a skirt. Any woman acting abnormal earned one title or another.

Walt loosened his grip on her throat, but kept his hand on her collar bone, ready to seize her again if she didn't cooperate. "What happened, Viv? Tell me how they fell."

Swallowing hard and fighting for breath between choking tears, Vivian felt cold, watching herself purge words between them. She shot them out hard and fast, trying to slap Walt back into his old self again. "The fire went out. I'd been up most all night - most every night - feedin' and keepin' 'em warm."

Walt's expression didn't change - he expected she'd

blame it on something, but not the babies themselves.

Words rushed from her throat. "So after you went to the road, I took me a nap. We was all curled up together. I had 'em with me. But the fire went out."

"You said they fell." He knew deep inside that if she changed her story he would kill her outright.

"You been sittin' on the bed, saggin' all them edges. They musta slid right down the blanket to the floor."

Now she was blaming him. Mattresses were made of straw ticking. He didn't know of anybody else's babies sliding to the floor - with nobody fetching them.

"I slept through their cryin'." Her chin quivered and she studied Walt's expression which did not soften. "I did not kill them babies, Walt."

He ticked off a list of those he knew she'd done in. "You killed Rena. That doctor at the Fair. This dog."

"I let him go. I had to. You were right, Walt. He ain't comin' for me. Now everythin' will be better."

Walt scoffed and moved his hand menacingly toward her throat again.

Vivian's words came quickly - with a hint of anger. "If I hadn't let the fire go out, they'd be okay. If you

hadn't ruint the bed they'd be okay. If you had a proper job like my daddy then we wouldn'ta been livin' like that! I slept through 'em dyin' on the floor. They musta been cryin'."

Vivian sobbed, and Walt wanted to believe her, just like a thousand times before. But she hadn't cried before. This was new.

She told him more. "I spent all day with that pup and decided two things. Lewis could have come and got me by now. He coulda found me like you do. I was tired of lovin' on that dog when I wanted my babies back."

The water from the pup reached the bedsheet and dripped slowly to the floor. Walt stared at the small puddle forming and said softly, "I wish to God I never saw you."

He started to back away, and Vivian tried to grab at him with a half-whispered word. "Walt."

"Damned if I know what to do about it now." He turned his back against her.

Words came to Walt's mind - those from others who hinted at a solution over the years. They said, "It ain't no crime to put down a mad dog," or, "The sick want to be

put out of their misery.”

The last rays of sunshine had entered the window and crossed Vivian's body. Walt knew he had benefitted from her crimes every time he pawned strange items in a town he had run to, escaping a mess of some sort behind them. He ate food bought with her plunder. Walt knew how to fix the problem, but feared the cure. He listened to her weep behind him and desperately wanted to believe her.

Someone rapped on the door - knocking firmly, yet only briefly. This was not like earlier sounds during their argument - coming from the walls and ceiling or the door - when the landlady came to holler at them, "Pipe down or take it outside!"

Walt walked sluggishly to the door. There, the Torrington Sheriff tipped his hat to the backside of his head, letting his hairline have air. His hand rested on a hip holster. Manacles dangled from his other.

Vivian quickly covered the puppy with bed covers. She scanned the room to see if any of the jewelry shone from the walls - but mostly it was buried inside the clothing Walt had thrown in heaps there. She went to cover up the pieces peeking out.

"No need to tidy up, ma'am. My business won't take long." The Sheriff said, "Word has it you two had three babies and now you got none." He determined to take one of them - and he preferred taking Walt. "Nobody I know likes lockin' up women-folk. When a ship sinks it's the captain's fault, sez I. But I'm a fair fella. Tell me where them babies is."

The Sheriff got no response from either Walt or Vivian. He pressed the issue, "I been askin' round. She's a bit odd, sir, no offense, ma'am," he nodded in her direction and continued. "But you're said to be a right good man, a friendly sort, not apt to harm nobody. On the quiet side, both of ya's. Even melancholic. But if folk had to pick one o' ya to be a problem, it'd be her." He focused on Walt directly. "What you got to say about that?"

A small smile began to curl the corner of Walt's mouth. The answer to all his problems stood booted and bowlegged before him.

The Sheriff moved his hand lightly to his pistol while half his mustache rose in a suspicious snarl, "What you smiling 'bout, mister?"

Vivian eyed the pitcher of water and thought she might crack the Sheriff's skull. She didn't want to alert him though, by moving quickly across the room.

Walt answered, "I'll go."

"Walt!" Vivian couldn't contain her surprise. She had a lost look on her face - but Walt didn't see.

"You'll go nice like?" The Sheriff raised the manacles. "I won't need these?" He felt uncomfortable about Walt's smile, and decided to apply the shackles when they got to his car.

Walt decided he'd nod to whatever the Sheriff accused him of, and put his mark next to any report that got writ up. It wouldn't really be a lie, Walt tried to convince himself, since he really was to blame - being the captain of his ship. He would mull that over in his mind, but for now he was pleased by the plan. One last thing he could do for her: hang for her crimes. Keep his vow to protect her and be through with her at the same time. One snap of his neck and he could rest.

Vivian's thoughts darted between the manacles and the pitcher, between the door and the holstered weapon.

Walt went peacefully, and didn't look back.

Chapter 32 - Cuckoo

Vivian listened to the floor boards creak in the hall as Walt left with the Sheriff. Her tongue went dry, beginning to swell, and her palms became clammy with sweat. Swallowing hard, she tried to calm her breathing. Vivian looked down at her feet, dusted with plaster. She needed to collect her thoughts - they had scattered too. Some of them she knew she wouldn't find - having purged so many through words. Now Walt had them.

She blew out the lamp and slid her back down the wall to sit on her heels in the dark. She felt like she did while watching Lewis drive away. And when the babies wouldn't wake. It was a sinking feeling.

It was Loss.

Eventually, Vivian knew what must be done. She would go after Walt and get him away from that Sheriff. She needed him back. They'd go somewhere and hide, living out the rest of their days wondering how they got there. A different kind of prison.

First, though, she would need to get another token of remembrance from Skipper. Watching the mask break brought

more loss, which welled up inside. Her gut churned, like she might bust open and join the mask on the floor. Its breaking made quite a racket - a higher pitched crack than Lewis' car made as he left. The babies, though, were as quiet as Walt when he walked away.

Vivian grabbed her coat and sprinted downstairs. Peeking inside the café, she could see that Skipper and Nelson were at the counter. He spiced the breakfast of a gentleman next to him with lively war stories. Skipper looked over a menu.

With the night as her faithful accomplice, Vivian dashed through the streets to Skipper's apartment. She searched for a key under the mat and on the ledge atop the door. Then she ran her fingers over the light fixture. Vivian figured she'd go round to the alley and try a window, but turned back. In the little time she had with Skipper, Vivian discerned that her new friend thought the world to be a good place, so Vivian decided to simply try the door. It swung easily open.

There was no time to stay in the hall waiting for the couple to return so they'd all chit-chat while Vivian looked for something to put in her pocket. Instead, she

would have to grab something quick so she could go get Walt. Inside the apartment, Vivian turned up the gas lights. The colorful furnishings spoke in hushed whispers of Skipper's friendship. The cuckoo clock bird startled Vivian as the weights tripped the gears, opening the little door for the yellow bird to appear. It called out one chime for the half hour. "*Cuckoo! Cuckoo!*"

Vivian pulled the green drapery aside and knew she'd better not disturb the masks. It would seem like grave robbing. That was something Vivian detested - but the masks of Skipper herself was what she truly wanted. Some of the faces seemed as though wonderful expressions had turned sour - noticing Vivian was alone. That didn't slow her down.

Going through the bureau drawers, she saw Skipper's intimates. The silken clothing felt cool and slick to the touch. The dress she wore in the café when Vivian spilled her meal had been cleaned and now hung to dry over the bowl used the day before to stir the plaster. Towels, spatulas and glass straws had been cleaned and put away. Vivian needed to find just the right memory.

A tea cup perhaps.

The kitchen had an old stove and newer ice box. Dishes were stacked in order by size and had a space of their own in the cupboard. Vivian swung the cups on their hooks and decided not to take one. It would ruin the set. She just needed something to remember Skipper by - something to keep the memory safe. But not something that would be missed.

Vivian sat at the table and ran her hand across its smooth surface, imagining two couples having dinner: she and Walt; Skipper and Nelson. Walt wouldn't have to talk because Nelson enjoyed it too much. And Skipper and Vivian would only need to think, to know one another's thoughts. Skipper would make more masks. Walt might even learn to paint after all. They would play cards - pinochle or rummy.

She imagined Skipper's children playing by the brightly covered window while Vivian rubbed her growing belly - expecting another child. Their apartment would be across the hall, where there was heat and water. Wood floors and glass windows. Businesses bustled conveniently below - shops within reach just outside her window. A pleasant scene, but one filled with loss since it could

never be. The law wanted her, but had Walt.

Vivian's thoughts were suddenly scratched out as the little, yellow bird clawed at her ears. "*Cuckoo! Curfew!*" She could not have sat there that long. Panicked, Vivian nearly knocked the chair over but kept it from falling. Yet it was not noise she battled - but time. Sliding the chair toward the table, the bird offered another warning.

"*Askew! Cuckoo!*"

She didn't remember the prior position of the chair so she let it be. She pulled a drawer open. There were all sorts and sizes of spoons, among many other utensils rattling together.

The bird pecked at her. "*Beaucoup! Cuckoo!*"

A lovely rose pattern graced one soup-spoon's handle - and went into Vivian's pocket. The bird seemed to scream. "*Cuckoo! Taboo!*"

Vivian bolted for the door and opened it while the bird mocked. "*Adieu, Cuckoo!*" Frustration made her forgetful, but she came back in to turn the lights. The bird raged. "*La mal vous! Cuckoo!*"

No, if anyone was evil, it was the little bird. Vivian scolded: "Shut up!"

In the hallway, Vivian saw Skipper and Nelson enter the door at the bottom of the narrow stairs. The muffled sound of the bird's laughter followed: "*Toodle-oo, Cuckoo.*"

They had seen her. And Vivian's hand still rested on the knob.

The bird now whispered, "*Pris vous, Cuckoo.*"

The bird was right - she'd been caught.

Skipper smiled weakly and Nelson waved but continued the story he had started in the street. "So what could I do? Little thing been coughin' all day, tryin' to hack somethin' up. Three years old. And she wouldn't eat. Wouldn't sleep. We finally looked in her mouth to see if it's red, right? That's what we expected - she's sick. What else could it be?"

They climbed the stairs with tired feet: Nelson with his hands at his neck to dramatize the action and Skipper studying Vivian's pale expression.

"A safety pin. Open, like this." He put up a "V" sign at his throat. Skipper looked at her husband and his hand. "So I went in and got it. Wasn't easy, mind you. Fussy little thing. Didn't like me at all. She used to, but that was before me tryin' to snatch a pin from her

throat. Delicate operation, it was. Well, long story short, the mother was grateful. Bought some carpet. Mexicans. But they paid in cash. Little girl got ice cream and a nap."

He turned to Vivian on the landing. "Hello, again. Vera? Vicky? Velma?"

"Vivian."

"Right. Sorry. You've come to see Skipper?"

Nervously, Vivian found the words. "Yes. The door was open."

"Well, you could have waited inside. Much warmer. Come in. Make yourself at home."

Vivian needed to go get Walt, and didn't know what to do with the emotions tearing at her insides. Skipper stood in her living room and stared uncomfortably at the floor - as if listening to her furniture tell the tale. Skipper felt it: a betrayal. And Vivian knew. She'd been caught before, but this time it brought a smashing sadness. With her heart bruised, she wanted to explain. "I don't think I'll ever see you again."

Skipper looked up. Nelson took her coat and hung it on a hook. He asked their guest, "Take your coat, Vivian?"

Hesitatingly, she answered, "No, thank you, Nelson. I should get going. My husband has business out of town, so we're moving again."

"Sign of the times. Market crashes and people scatter, duckin' for cover. You do have our address though. Skipper's big on letters. You won't leave before havin' some tea, right?"

Skipper shook her head "no" toward her husband, then moved forward to embrace Vivian - who slumped in her arms. The built-up frustration left her, absorbed by her friend.

Vivian hoped Skipper only sensed discomfort and attributed it to her impending move. Vivian put her hands on Skipper's waist, then her back - not sure how to react properly. She hadn't had much practice with friendships. But now she knew they didn't have to be burdensome.

As she left, Vivian eyed the little blue cuckoo in the clock that had not gone back inside its home. It remained very still, with its orange beak open wide. Its big red eyes followed Vivian. Given more time, she would have snatched that bird from its perch, spring and all, and slid it into her pocket instead of the lovely rose spoon.

Chapter 33 - The Migrant

Vivian needed a car. Such an unnerving night. First Walt had raged about their room and scared stories out of her, and then the Sheriff showed up. Walt seemed relieved by his arrest and walked away without a word - wearing her handcuffs. Then Skipper. Vivian reached into her pocket and squeezed the rose spoon - pressing it into her splintered palm.

Now there was nothing to do but pack their belongings. Vivian wrestled with Walt's duffle bag, half dragging it into the hall. Left behind were pieces of the broken mask kicked into a corner and the dead puppy still hidden in the sheets. She'd have to find a car before Walt's load wore her out. It now thudded rhythmically down the steps. A nagging thought told Vivian that this patched and fraying army bag was about all that was left of Walt - and that wouldn't do. She'd be going after him. The reversal amused and irritated her at the same time. Normally he was the one chasing her, keeping himself company with some high, unfailing notion of duty.

Vivian, though, had to fetch her husband out of her

sense of survival - and a bit of guilt. Walt didn't deserve being arrested. She yanked his bag and dropped it further down the street in a hop and kick motion. Her own carpet bag slapped against her opposite thigh. She wondered whether Walt somehow also saved himself every time he performed what he termed: "her rescue." He did once joke with Jule about Vivian being his ticket to heaven - since God Himself had His hat off to him for the drudgery and danger involved. Nevertheless, Vivian didn't begrudge Walt a place in heaven. No one deserved it more, except maybe her father.

With that, and the search for a car, Vivian remembered her father suddenly throwing a magazine across their sitting room, and then launching a storm of promises to write all of the rag's advertisers - and congressmen as well. Everyone from Coca-Cola to Sears and Roebuck were on his list. Not usually swift to anger, he had gone from sleepy-summertime reader to vengeful righter of wrongs - and all over one tiny ad. It showed a clean-cut youth looking inside a car. At the boy's heel lay the seemingly innocent caption suggesting that people take their keys out of the ignition. It added: "Don't make a good boy go bad."

Nothing could calm Vivian's father from the outrage of such a notion. He thundered, "You can't make a good boy go bad . . . Good boys don't steal cars!"

Vivian agreed, and took this early lesson to heart. Advertisers lie and a strange but desperate human tendency exists to blame anyone or any thing other than the one at fault. She had to stay vigilant to know when a wrong was sneaking about. Her father was right. He relied on these fine points of truth that typically escaped the casual reader. Goodness and badness had nothing to do with opportunity. It's something a person is. Vivian smiled at the fond thoughts of home, but they didn't stop her from looking for a car with the keys still in the ignition.

Streetlights came on and people briskly shuffled about with their shoulders bunched and chins tucked deeply into collars. Too many of them were still out, so Vivian didn't try the few cars parked on the street. She dragged Walt's bag past windows darkened by shades being pulled. Business owners locked their wares inside for the night. They had no need for cars since they lived above their shops. The air was damp but smelled of suppers readying in those upper rooms. Vivian would not be eating tonight. She had a long

trip ahead and didn't want to become sleepy.

The homes behind the businesses were not remarkable and of no discernable style. It could be reasoned that cars would not be found there. Vivian decided she could leave her bags hidden beneath crates discarded under a clump of trees. She'd remain free to find a car quickly, then drive back for them. Her work was noted only by a few mangy cats and distant dogs barking at her or perhaps at some other unrest under the stars. After burying the bags in the rotten wooden heap, she looked beyond the heavy branches providing a bit of cover. She saw a car.

It was a Willys delivery sedan, idling between two houses. Exhaust rolled out in steaming wafts, spreading thin to vanish. One house was in a better state of repair than the other, and Vivian assumed the car belonged to its occupants. The shed encasing the vehicle appeared to belong to the other. Its boards were broken, pulling nails out at every angle with pained groans. It leaned as if the car alone held it upright.

From the lighted doorway of the house in the same condition, a woman emerged carrying a toddler peeking from beneath a blanket. She bent over the backend of the car,

bumping the loose shed with one meaty hip. Vivian cringed, thinking the rickety structure liable to collapse on their heads. If the child thrashed and kicked a bit more it surely would. Watching, Vivian mostly wondered what the woman was doing.

Moving several steps closer to get a good look, Vivian saw the dirty ragged blanket being pulled over the child's head - held tight between his shoulder and the woman's breast while the loose end was spread over the tailpipe. The child soon stopped fussing. His little limbs relaxed in her arms. She then stood and carried him back inside the house.

Vivian sprinted across the narrow patch of mud serving as a street in front of these homes. She shied back out of sight in the shadow provided by the shed - dark in contrast to the lights in the home. Peering through a window, she saw the woman gently lay her child into his bed next to an older brother who did not stir. The mother then grabbed his sister, posing in her mother's shoes in front of a mirror. The girl whined and struggled, insisting it was not yet her bedtime. Her feet eventually rose above the shoes which tumbled across the floor.

Vivian could see the woman better now. Long shining dark hair bounced behind her floral blouse as she made her way from home to tailpipe. She faintly hummed the child to sleep beneath the torn blanket - a patchy green. As a schoolgirl, Vivian and her friends used to grab the back bumper of a bus and let it drag them skating across snow and ice. The bus would soon hit a bump or go too fast and the children fell laughing. Vivian loved the smell of exhaust. It brought back a happy memory.

Slippers slapped the wooden steps as the woman retreated to tuck her daughter into bed. Another child was taken by the arm and lifted to her feet. This one apparently felt content enough to follow until her toy was snatched away and tossed back onto the steps. The little girl's calm then broke into high pitched screeching: "Dolly. Dolly." Her words morphed into long screams. "Dolleeii!"

While wearing the mask of darkness, Vivian asked, not able to stop herself: "Why?"

The woman stopped abruptly and looked hard into the shadows. The child stopped rioting as well and tried to see with big eyes where the voice had come from. But both

were unable to see. Squinting, the woman demanded, "Quienes?"

Vivian moved slowly into the light. "What are you doing?"

Indignant, the woman countered, "What you doing?" She waved her arm toward the street. "You go." Thinking that was the last word on the subject, she moved the child to the tailpipe and placed the blanket as before. Soon lying limp, the girl's chest could be seen rising and falling, breathing cool evening air as the woman stood and smoothed hair across the tiny brow. Picking up the doll before ascending the steps, she turned back, impatiently looking the shadowy visitor in the eye.

Vivian asked again, "Why?"

Wrinkling her brow as if the answer were obvious, the woman explained, "I drop doll too many time in mud. Too much work. She wait."

The two women stared at each other blankly for a few seconds before Vivian corrected. "No, I mean why are you gassing them?"

She shifted on her feet with annoyance. "So they asleep. Father don't like it he come home and they be not

asleeping."

Vivian wondered how many children she had accidentally killed this way. "That can't be good for them."

"He not good for them if they not sleep! He not good for me, too." She waved the back of her hand toward the street again. "Go. Vaya!" The woman put her daughter into bed and placed the doll in the crook of her little arm before tucking the bed covers under both their chins. When she came back outside she stopped on the threshold with her hands on her hips and sighed with exasperation.

Vivian was still there.

The woman blurted with fatigued bewilderment, "What you want?"

Cocking her head slightly as if the answer were obvious, Vivian parted her lips to begin, but the woman only saw the shrugging appearance of a stranger poking her nose where it didn't belong. Briskly, she sailed past Vivian to the car window. She could reach in, not because the passenger window was rolled down as Vivian initially thought, but because the glass was busted out leaving jagged pieces around the edges like hungry teeth. The car rattled into silence as she turned the key and marched back

to her home. Vivian had moved toward the street but turned back in time to throw a question through her door before it closed. "Why don't you kill him?"

The door re-opened in a rush, making the woman's hair billow behind her ears. Her eyes were wide and her jaw fell open with a gasp. "Que?"

Vivian thought her question was simple enough. She began to turn away, but the woman pursued, stomping down the sagging wooden steps with a finger held up like a sword ready for battle. Vivian admired the fire in her eyes but took a few steps backward. The woman's hair and skirt fluttered behind like black smoke in the wind. She moved like a train, with one-track focus, and overtook her target. Spitting a string of Spanish words in Vivian's face, she flung her fingers - all ten of them - into the small steamy space between their noses. Her sharp nails pierced that air and punctuated whatever words had fallen as impassioned nonsense on Vivian's ears. She smelled spicy.

"I just wondered." Vivian again inserted the question while the dark woman took a breath. "So, why don't you?"

"Why I not kill him?" She wrinkled up her face in

disgust. Her words came out as if running out of air. "He is my husband! Es un . . .un . . .mortal sin!"

"Gassing your kids might be a sin, too. You do that every night?"

"None of this your business. What we do if he dead? You go. Ahora."

Vivian stepped back as nails flurried in her direction while the fiery woman spewed jumbled syllables. Then she pursed her lips tight and her eyes grew bigger at each of Vivian's words that followed.

"Every night, times four children, over how many years - or," Vivian added slowly, "or, only one sin once and be done with it. I expect God does the math and won't mind. Besides, you people go to confession and wipe it all away to start over clean, right?" Vivian always felt that a system so easy must be made up. Her Protestant father favored forgiveness just once with no need to bother the good Lord again. But his system wasn't as easy, because the sinner needed to be sincere or it didn't take.

Spanish cursing started again as the wife began to leave. She spun on her heels, making her long hair slap Vivian's face. She blinked hard and stepped back - hearing

familiar words: *Diablo, estúpido, policia and loco.*" When she opened her eyes, Vivian saw only the dust fly out in little gusts from the loose boards to dance in dim light escaping from the windows. The door had slammed, but the children didn't stir.

Vivian thought about her own children, much smaller than these. Walt would have never hurt them. It was then that half-breathed, haphazard words came through the abandoned streets from another direction. The coming of this dark, dusty man was heralded in a swaggering song. "Canto. . .bailo. . .bebo. . .lloro. . .angustioso..."

Vivian saw his shadow first, swaying without purpose - like a weak growth tossed on a pleasant breeze, begging to be uprooted. Then the shadow's elbow tipped back a bottle-shape to pour drink down a stubbled chin, more than down his throat. He stumbled over his own boots - which became wet and shiny from the sloshing bottle held loose, leading the way. The mangy cats ran as he finished his ragged gurgling song. "Por favor... beseme ahor. . .a, mi amor."

Vivian decided to have a quick word with him before leaving town.

Now in full view, the man staggered, cursed and

laughed. To the stars he toasted: "Vivir. Vivir."

Drinking hungrily, he darted a friendly eye toward Vivian.

She smiled, asking sweetly if she could have a sip.

"To warm myself."

The man stopped and gazed upon her top to bottom and back - a blurred but pleasing vision. He held the bottle forward. Taking it, Vivian let her finger touch his before sliding the bottle away. He smelled of the fields - a migrant farm worker. His boots were caked with cropped rows. The earth filled his pockets, pant cuffs, fingernails and every crease and wrinkle of his face and neck. Practically buried already.

Vivian crooked her finger, beckoning him to follow into darkness. She nodded his way for encouragement. Vivian wished she could tell her father that he was also right about the proverbs being true. Men follow - as oxen go to slaughter.

If she let the migrant go home, he would no doubt plop down and order his woman to pull off his boots. Then he would grab her and bend her over a table, which she no doubt expected. He would shake dust and sweat from both their bodies while the table hammered flimsy walls,

threatening to bury them all - still, the children would never stir. Yes, if she let him go home, Vivian would watch from the window, missing her chance to help God balance the books. Instead, this moment could be something truly selfless, like the Reverend John had talked about.

When the migrant stood with Vivian beyond the light, he heard the startling crash of his bottle breaking. Bits of it reflected flashes of light somehow emanating from Vivian's eyes - or so it seemed in his spinning world. He got a good look at the jagged glass as it appeared to move slowly from the rock on the ground but had indeed rushed toward his throat, catching him by surprise.

She was fast, pushing him back against the building. Digging. Warm blood squirted in every direction. It ran though the bottle neck onto her hand and then downward to drip from her elbow. She wiped blood from her cheek bone with her forearm and tossed the bottle aside.

Vivian didn't want to linger and watch him die for fear of letting his ghost focus its attention on her. Emotion, she knew, builds up during pain, fear and anger - and that energy is necessarily spent by slamming doors, running and screaming, or punching walls and people. But

if the body drops out from under a ghost before spending the energy, the angry ghost is just stuck with it all. Vivian sure didn't want to stick around and let it fixate on her. Best to leave while his ghost was busy trying to keep the body on its feet. It had been a long time since Vivian worried about ghosts, but there was something in the migrant's eyes that she didn't want to see again. Hopefully his ghost would keep to home where it belonged.

Staying in the shadows, out of his eye line, Vivian darted back to the trees - using her skirt as a rag to wipe the blood. She then heard angels sing again. Vivian had grown more aware of them over the last few weeks - making her more certain each time. They drowned out the man's careless song. He gurgled much the same as before and his ghost hadn't yet left him.

As Vivian yanked a bright red dress from a clothesline, she heard the man's body slump into a heap with a muffled sound - followed by an escaping sigh. No time to lose. Vivian hurried her bags from beneath the pile of old crates - making enough noise to wake the dead. Dogs again reported the clamor, and the Spanish woman peered from a window thinking she'd see her man coming home

- but she saw only the darkness.

When the widow withdrew behind her curtain again, Vivian took the bags with some difficulty to the car - still making more noise than she'd like. Again, the woman pressed her nose to the glass and cupped her hands in vain, trying to glimpse her husband's return. Vivian thought of Walt and felt that once she got him back she should try to mend her ways - having caused him some measure of trouble this time. Her mind tossed with so many recent changes. Not only changes with Walt, but her own new feelings fought against her faithful habits - habits that had served her well to this point. But if she could manage to change, she shuddered at the thought: what if she no longer heard the angels?

Vivian hoisted the bags into the backseat and felt confident that she wouldn't be chased for some time. Time enough to get where she's going and change cars. It would be daylight before the body could be found, unless headlights revealed him. Vivian imagined the fiery woman telling neighbors that her husband stumbled and fell on his bottle. She might pray for his soul and curse her predicament, but know with some certainty who to thank.

Maybe she would even ask God to do something nice for a stranger.

The engine turned over. Vivian clicked her car door closed in the same moment and threw it in reverse. She kept a watchful eye on the woman's window as she raced backward around the side of the house, hoping to be out of sight before the curtain would slide aside again. It was a chance. Vivian quickly passed the bloody body and saw no sign of its ghost. She braked on the other side of the house only long enough to tap a short picket fence. She put it in first and sped off by moonlight, eventually flipping on the lights. The broken window howled through its sharp teeth. And Vivian howled back.

Chapter 34 - The Sheriff

No amount of prodding could encourage Walt to talk. He didn't have anything to say, but he did look forward to jail. There he could rest, and hopefully have his promises jerked loose from him at the end of a rope. The Sheriff grew angry. "Ya better be ready to talk when I get ya in front o' some paper. Nothin' worse'n wastin' my day posin' questions to a damned brick wall. It rightly upsets a fella. Makes me forget feedin' time, if ya get my meaning."

It occurred to Walt that Vivian had forgotten to kick at him on his way out the door. He thought of his last painting that he'd get to do - if he'd ever had taken those lessons. He'd paint Vivian in sadness, wearing a green dress as she stood in his swinging shadow. She'd shed a tear or two, sorry for what she'd done. He'd like that. But Walt didn't expect her to attend his hanging - and he knew there would be no painting.

The Sheriff whistled a tune until he left the pavement and drove slow on a dusty side road. The trail was high in the center with shrubs overtaking its ditches. Beneath

Walt's feet, he could feel the sage and larger rocks hidden in clumps of dried mud scrape the bottom of the car. The Sheriff rubbed his chin and looked at Walt in his mirror. "If you weren't headed for jail I'd suggest applyin' yerself down at the ethanol and sugar plant. Good work we got out there. O'course, the railroad comes through here, too, and ya can't beat a job with them boys."

Being off the main road, Walt wondered if the lawman had got himself bored and wanted some fun with his prisoner. Maybe he'd shoot at Walt's feet to make him dance. But the Sheriff seemed to be in a pleasant mood - not an ornery one.

"I was a Call Boy with 'em years ago. Now that's a dangerous job." The Sheriff's eyes smiled in the mirror. "When a train'd come in, railmen had to be woke up cause o' course nobody had no phones. They slept in flop houses and sometimes only got but a few hours sleep. I'd run an' shake 'em up. Now ya understand, they wouldn't 'preciate it none. Helluva job. Soon as I'd see those eyeballs target me I'd high-tail it to the next fella. They'd grab at me, see, to make me sorry for botherin' 'em - or sometimes they'd let fly whatever they could reach and it'd

crash around me." The Sheriff's voice slowed in reminisce. "Helluva job. Good for a good runner though."

The Sheriff continued his treatise on child labor. He figured Call Boy work wasn't as dangerous as being a setter at the bowling alley. "Them pins all explode in a wild flurry, blasting off the floor comin' up like a bat outta hell. I'd get a good beatin' back there. And it wasn't altogether healthy to keep score either! Yep. Bit dicey up front, too. Those big bowlers' mood could change on a dime. They'd bust into a right indignant rage if the math weren't the way they thought it oughta be. After a few drinks they might fight regardless. Still, it was good work for a boy lookin' for a few coins to take to his mother - makin' hisself useful."

Walt saw birds of prey fly low alongside the car, looking for freshly dead or dying. The Sheriff continued, "But you won't be getting' outta jail to work in our town if we find them babies in a bad way." The Sheriff eyed Walt's lack of reaction in the mirror and took it for coldness.

"We got methods now you must'a read 'bout one time or 'nother. See there was these two convicts got sent to

Leavenworth at diff'rent times back 'fore the Great War. In them days we measured bones so's to identify repeat offenders. But now we got inkin' methods." He held up his hand and turned it back and front with fingers spread. "Whole departments set up for lookin' at what can't be changed by time and a good barber. Back then, though, one o' them ol' boys measured to be a repeat offender - which he swore up and down t'wern't true. Snapped his picture, too, and damned if it didn't match. Even that didn't shut his mouth from flappin'. Kept sayin' he's no repeater. O' course nobody believed him. Then come to find out they already had the other feller in a cell."

The Sheriff laughed, "Both was Negras - looked to be twins and both sent up for the same type o' crime. Aint' that somethin'? Their names was even the same. Will and William West. Some say they wasn't twins - just a fluke. They claimed they didn't know one another. Now a coincidence like that, to my mind, would have to be a miracle - but no miracle is a coincidence, so I say they's twins - both fated for Leavenworth. You got any thoughts on it?"

Walt stared at the tumbleweeds that the wind gathered

six foot high on wooden snow guards. They stopped the drifting progress that snow tended towards - but now gave only the last of the tumbles a leg up to be first and roll high over the fence - to go where God intended.

Frustrated, the Sheriff sighed, "A fella with such tight lips as you got on ya will sure enough starve hisself right to death in my jailhouse."

He stopped the car at a wide spot in the road surrounded by a few scattered buildings. Between them, antlers were piled higher than the rooftops. "Sit tight. I got a bit o' business to tend." He studied the mirror, checking his mustache and teeth, smoothed his hair and straightened his tie. Beyond skins stretched out to dry on a frame, the Sheriff knocked on the door of a small grey stucco house. From the lamplight inside, Walt saw that a woman extended her plump arm toward the Sheriff, who held his hat in his hands and wiped his feet before entering. She wrapped her fingers round his tie and tugged him forward.

Once that rickety door closed, Walt looked for other signs of life in the area. There were several outbuildings. One would certainly be for smoking meat and

another looked to be a two-holer. On a sagging porch, a hound dog laid his lazy head on the foot of a dusty old pioneer just two doors down.

As he sat, Walt started to come to his senses. Away from Vivian, he could always think more clear, and began to worry for her and how she'd get on without him. He shook his head. Part of him hated her.

Walt also worried about facing his mother and grandfather on the other side of life if he didn't go down without a fight. Besides, silence might not be a hanging offense. He'd have to lie, and that was worth plenty of worry. His plan tempted and taunted him.

There was something too easy about it - not a man's way out. Two small voices argued in his head. A man keeps his promises. No, a man could hang for her - and be rid of her at the same time - ending the promises. A man doesn't try to get rid of his promises - he keeps them. A man doesn't lie for a woman. A man protects his wife no matter what. A man doesn't believe everything a woman says. A man knows she's weak and takes up the slack. A man doesn't claim to do what he didn't do. A man would have protected his children. A man would have strangled her. Walt waited

for the other voice to say a man forgives - or hopes - or is patient - but it was silent, and so the last words echoed in his head. Strangle her. Strangle her.

Shackled to the arm rest, Walt managed to get his legs into the front seat to kick the gear shift into neutral. The car rolled forward slowly. He steered with his left foot and steadied himself on the dash with his right. Walt turned the car and kicked it back into a gear to stop the rolling just in time. He avoided hitting the support beam which barely held up the old pioneer's porch. Only the dog perked with interest.

Walt let himself fall back into his seat next to his open window. He sat face to face with the old man, who looked amused with a long weed hanging from his ragged mouth. Through sunkissed cheeks almost hidden by white whiskers, he grinned but said nothing. The dog offered a low throaty growl.

Walt spoke softly, "You got a way to loose me outta this, friend?"

The old man, skinny and dry, leaned back on his chair until it bumped the wall behind him. Smiling broadly, he let his words out slow like a thoughtful raspy song, "Could

be, mister, but why would I wanna?"

"I can pay."

The old man moved the weed from one side of his cracked lips to the other. "You say you got cash money?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lessee it."

Walt opened the door and stepped out, which relieved his handcuffed arm somewhat from being extended across his body all that time. He rolled his left shoulder and cracked his neck as he stretched. Digging deep, Walt pulled out some crumpled bills that he had quickly stuffed into his trouser pocket when he bought Vivian's breakfast and puppy.

The old man's eyes sparkled, unaware of the more sizeable stash that Walt kept in the pouch hidden in his shirt. Gnarled oversized knuckles swooped down over the cash and the old man spat as he slid the paper swiftly into his own pocket. "I'll see what I can find for this mess of yorn." He jutted his chin toward Walt over his shoulder as he walked round the side of his porch. "Sheriff won't be much longer though."

Bowlegged, the old man propped himself with a cane

generously decorated with dog tooth gouges. He hobbled as best he could and returned with long handled loppers that easily snapped the link holding Walt to the car.

"Thanks," Walt nodded as he breezed by the old man the moment he was freed. Wearing one half of the shackle on his wrist, he ducked between buildings and brush, disappearing into darkness. With the memory of where the sun had set, Walt knew he could head east and step into Nebraska or the Dakotas long before sunrise, but Vivian was due north. He would follow Sage Creek through Hat Creek Valley and find the main road.

The night air cut through his open jacket and flannel shirt. The wind slashed his ears with icy whips. Moonlight let Walt see his way clear enough, but sharp prairie plants cut through his trousers below the knee. As Walt tired and slowed he felt confident he'd run several miles, long and hard enough to warm himself.

Soon though, he heard the howl of the old hound dog behind - and gaining ground. Walt ran again, desperately looking for that road. His sides ached and his lungs burned while listening to the gallop of horse hooves nearing. Picking up the pace, Walt fell down the side of a

gully, invisible inside the darkness. He slid down the sand to the bottom. The hound bayed, announcing his victory.

Walt cried out when teeth sank into his left leg behind the knee. He rolled over to fight the dog but it jumped, planting two front paws firmly on Walt's chest. It growled menacingly over his face. Walt's hands blocked most of the slobber and sight of those hungry jaws.

"Joe," the old man said. Walt heard saddle leather squeak while the dog panted and licked his chops. Down from his horse, he let his lantern swing from the horn.

He carried a .300 Savage, and put the stock down into the dirt, using the weapon as a cane. He stopped next to Walt's elbow and dug one boot into the ground to make his stand. From there he snapped a piece of tall grass from a nearby clump and clenched it between his teeth. When looking up to the stars, his eyes sparkled. One shot from the rifle was let into the sky, which startled the dog into fiercer growling and snapping at Walt's arms. A car engine turned over in the distance and the old man chuckled.

"You didn't think you'd have a chinaman's chance o' gettin' away from ol' Joe, did ya?" He scratched his

friend behind the ears and laughed. "Johnny-law figured you'd head for this road. Sure 'nuff, you done it, sonny. I told him you scared the beejesus clean out o' me so I had to let you go. I can't never tell if'n he believes that ever' time, or if he jus' enjoys chasin' folk." The old man nudged Walt's shoulder with the toe of his boot. "An' I can tell ya plain, mister - my story sticks, cause Joe don't like fellers callin' me a liar. He already got a taste o' you."

He called his dog off and told Walt it was time to go. "Sheriff pays me fer unofficial deputy work. Mebbe he jus' feels guilty fer visitin' my daughter. I dunno. Mebbe I'll sic ol' Joe on him one day."

Walt limped to the road where yellow headlights waited. The hound bounded about the brush playfully and the old man followed mounted on his horse with rifle ready. Smoking a cigar, the Sheriff slunk back in his seat with an elbow resting easily out the window.

"Ol' Joe caught yer rabbit, Sheriff."

"Thanks, Claude. Hog tie him for me." The Sheriff counted out a payment for the old man. They shook hands and Walt was shoved into the back seat, face down, with the

ends of the rope secured between window frames. "Don't cause me no more trouble, boy. It's late and I'm thirsty."

After a few miles on the main road they took another turn onto some wagon ruts nearly overtaken by the brush. They drove into a grove of trees on the leeward side of a hill where the Sheriff could get a drink from another friendly woman. Lightening had struck the tops of several trees - those already shaved of their branches from being on the windward side. The path led past fallen fences, busted barrels and shacks in various states of disrepair. The place was in want of a man, but still stood. Barely.

The Sheriff stopped the car in between two tar-paper shacks. The black paper was affixed to wooden frames, and even though those walls were insulated with rags and newspapers, they kept out neither the summer heat nor winter cold. It was an old roadhouse built on the forgotten stage run to the Dakotas, spitting distance from the state line.

The Sheriff tethered his exhausted and wounded prisoner with a rope around his throat, but untied his legs. His hands were left bound in front so Walt could piss into the bushes beside the house.

An old woman was called out of the house to watch the prisoner. She came with a rifle in one hand and a baby on her hip. "Put'm in the hole," she growled without looking at Walt.

Her long grey hair whipped out the sides of the scarf covering the top of her head. It was tied tight under her sagging chin. She wore a long old skirt of thick cloth and a patched shawl over bent shoulders. After putting the baby down in the sand, she sat on a wobbly stump - letting her skirt droop loosely over thighs that spread wide for stability. The rifle tucked comfortably under her arm and she pointed it at Walt.

The little tyke in the sand beside her had been bundled well. He sat sheltered from the wind only by the woman's skirt flapping about him on one side. Occasionally the cloth darted in front of his face, which made him laugh - playing peek-a-boo with Walt. Otherwise, the infant, plump and fresh faced, silently stared at Walt with big brown eyes nestled into cherub cheeks reddened from the cold.

The Sheriff instructed Walt to wriggle himself into a hole dug beneath the corner of the shack. It was a small

cave, more of a wash out, just big enough for a dog to get out of the wind. Most of Walt stuck out. The leash was still tight on his neck and the Sheriff rolled the car over the other end. He warned him, "Stay yer ass right there. Bitsy here don't take no fuss. She ain't trigger-shy."

Walt saw the no-nonsense look from the woman's hardened face and heard the Sheriff's boots shuffle up the creaky porch steps. He entered the shack where a younger woman giggled. The man-child sitting guard duty with the older woman had taken to tasting the sand. Little wet fingers dipped in to the first knuckle and were held up to be looked over, then brought back to his mouth. He sucked most of them clean - and repeated.

The old woman never took her cold eyes from Walt. They both could hear the faint fuzzy music of a radio - a bit off-station, probably just out of proper range. Then a bed frame squeaked itself into groans and laughter.

Eventually, the Sheriff emerged with a bottle and gave Walt a gulp or two. It would help against the cold, he said. The baby had for some time begun fussing and was toted back into the shack. The Sheriff tugged on Walt's leash and led him back into the car. Walt was glad to be

out of the wind. Haphazardly, his feet were tied with the length of rope but the Sheriff told him, "I'm in no mood for games. Behave yerself back there."

Walt slept for the rest of the drive. They arrived at the county seat during the night. A Deputy in uniform finished untying the bonds and Walt didn't waste time rubbing blood back into his fingers. There was less wind in town, but Walt still looked forward to a warm bed.

The Sheriff rattled keys loudly across the iron bars, causing other prisoners to stir. There were three connected holding cells along one wall facing the Sheriff's desk and door. Two men were in the first, even though there was only one cot, and another man rested in the middle cell. They groaned, stretched and sat, expecting breakfast, but were told not to get excited - the sun wasn't up yet. They were to be introduced to company.

The Deputy began to open the middle cell, but the prisoner there shouted, "You put him in here I'll kill him! Don't think I won't. I ain't sharin' my bed."

The Deputy sighed and looked over his shoulder at the Sheriff, who said, "This guy is clearly bigger'n you, knucklehead. I 'spect he'll tear you up and spit you out."

The prisoner widened his wild eyes and slobbered out the words: "I'll kill him!"

"It's too late in the day for this fuss," the Sheriff sighed, "Let him bunk in the clean one, Earl."

Deputy Earl moved Walt down the row and corrected the Sheriff. "It's actually early. Nearly sun-up." Then he explained to Walt, "There's a law against not washin' the beddin', but no law against ya'll sharing."

"Good enough for our army boys - good enough for these no-gooders." The Sheriff hung his hat on an antler rack. "Well, Earl, looks like we got a full house. We're earning our pay this week. But this ol' boy has a bad case o' lockjaw. No breakfast for him till he's feelin' better."

Earl shook his head and tsked toward Walt, "Gotta open yer mouth to get food in, don't ya know." He turned to the Sheriff, "What's the question?"

"I wanna hear 'bout three infant whereabouts. They's gone missin' and this big fella knows somethin'. Or at least," he smiled slyly, "he ain't denied knowin'." Spitting tiny bits of cigar to the floor beside him, the Sheriff announced, "Add to the list o' charges one count o' escape, one set o' busted hand shackles he owes me for, an'

o' course bein' damned disrespectful and uncooperative. He ain't said one word 'cept to Claude. An' them's was fightin' words."

"Ol' Claude seems kinda skiddish."

"Claude's a bad liar but a good tracker. His only problem is greed. An' mebbe the gout." The Sheriff and Deputy leaned back in their chairs to eye their prisoners. "Ever'body seems ta have at least one problem."

They introduced Walt to his neighbors. "Leslie there has got booze for brains - gets him to thinkin' he's a pistoleer. And young Ross miscalculates how much dry goods can fit inside his pockets 'fore it all falls out an' gets him caught."

The lawmen laughed, "What a lout."

Ross looked at his boots.

"Don't get sore, Ross - but I do gotta say, if a can o' molasses fell outta my pocket I sure as hell wouldn't step in the muck and fall on my ass." They roared and hooted, slapping their knees.

The star on Earl's chest flashed a bolt of light across the room as he pointed to the center cell, "That habitual miscreant there is Howard Short. Not to be

trusted."

"You'd think a feller would want to stay away from the hangman. Among other things we got 'em for tryin' to pass homemade money upon the unwary. Makes me mad."

Earl shouted, "Folk don't like gettin' gypped! You part Gypsy, Howard?" Earl grinned and looked sideways at the Sheriff. "I say he's Gypsy. Son of a swindler."

"Looks like it. Mebbe Irish. We could flip a coin on that an' both sides' be true."

"Mebbe we should let the big guy eat him."

"I wonder." The Sheriff turned toward Walt, "We really would like to get ol' Howard on murder just sose we can watch him hang and won't haveta entertain his ugly mug in here again. He's become more regular'n Leslie an' I'm damned tired of it." They waited for a reaction from Walt, which didn't come. "You want we should let Howard try and kill ya?"

Nothing from Walt.

"You got nothin' to say?"

Silence - except for growls from Howard.

Earl told the Sheriff, "I guess he knows how big he is. Howard ain't got him worried none. But if ol' Howard

don't get to kill nobody, we can at least hang the new guy."

"Unless he can find us three infants."

"None o' these boys is too bright."

"Nope." The Sheriff agreed.

Morning came through the windows, casting rays of light on stately antelope trophies mounted on the wall above the Sheriff's shoulders. Earl blew out the flame of his lamp. He shuffled papers on the desk and reported, "Got a call last night, Sheriff - somethin' 'bout a kid, couple o' women and a wheelbarrow."

"I'll hafta get to that in a bit." The Sheriff watched Walt examine his torn pant leg. He eyed the dried blood flaking onto the floor. Elbowing Earl, he said, "Claude's dog tore into the big fella. I'll head down to the café and see if Doc's up and about yet. You get our new guest inked proper and mebbe we'll get him patched 'fore the photographer comes." The Sheriff turned to Walt before leaving the jailhouse, but spoke to Earl, "We like 'em in the pink by hangin' time, don't we Earl?"

The door closed and rattled the blinds. Earl nodded, "That we do."

Chapter 35 - Gallows

Shortly after the Sheriff left the jailhouse, and before Earl prepared the fingerprinting tray, the door reopened slowly, making the little bell jingle above. That was the only sound as Vivian surveyed the room at a glance and approached the Deputy, who then nearly tipped his chair back - head over heels. Leslie, Ross and Howard all exhaled long whistles at the sight of her. Painted and polished, with her new Spanish red dress unbuttoned low and her skirt unbuttoned high, Vivian cut quite a bright and shapely figure in the doorway.

She stood with a knee peeking, shyly at first, slowly fanning the skirt open left and right. A sight for sore eyes. She moved across the floor like a ship sailing on calm seas - gliding with a flirtatious smile for the Deputy. Beneath the thin fabric of her dress she was not properly bound, and the men knew. Her breasts swayed slightly as she walked, and her hips swung toward the wide-eyed man. He watched her hands glide slowly down her thighs, then catch bits of cloth on their return rise to her hips. Earl stuttered, "May I help you, ma'am?"

Walt left his cot and moved forward, wrapping his fingers round the cold bars. He knew she liked to flirt, and this time it was apparently staged for his rescue. Still, he despised her for it. He despised her knee - and her buttons. He watched his wife run fingers through Earl's hair as the poor man sputtered and tried to breathe. He had nowhere to go as she blocked any exit from his chair. In all their years together, Vivian never approached Walt this way, or even responded with any measurable amount of desire. He grasped the bars tightly and wanted to squeeze the life out of her.

"Ma'am, I think you've mistaken me for someone else," Earl stood, knocking the chair over. Three prisoners laughed. Earl tried to scoot round to the other side of the desk. This surprised Vivian, as usually her prey became hypnotized by this point, surrendering, unable to run. She pursued, fingering his star as she tugged at his shirt, nearing him again as he retreated. Walt's neighbors whistled and hooted vile encouragements. Earl nervously raised his hands in the air near his ears to avoid touching her. "Please sit down, ma'am!"

There was either something very wrong with him - or

something very right. He was a curiosity, but there was no time to understand it - the Sheriff would return soon. Now, blocking him in front of his desk, Vivian whispered, "Kiss me" and tugged at Earl's belt.

Earl bolted away like a startled cat, turning his back, "Now, lady - you've got to stop! This is neither the time nor the place for. . ."

It was then, when his back was turned and he tried so hard to find effective words, that the heavy hurricane lamp crashed onto the back of his skull. The hooting prisoners immediately fell silent but their jaws dropped. Earl went down hard.

Over the Deputy's hair and across the back of his neck, his blood oozed, trickled and mixed with the oil from the lamp. The flow pooled but crept along, seeping into considerable gaps of flooring made of large wooden bricks.

Vivian felt frustrated and insulted that the Deputy didn't succumb to her advances, yet she smashed him harder than necessary. The deputy didn't deserve to die, but she didn't exactly know how it could have been avoided. She'd never clubbed somebody over the head only to make them sleep, so she didn't know how hard to hit him. She felt

bad. That was new as well. It was a cold feeling, like when the stove goes out. She felt that same chill when Walt offered his wrists to the Sheriff.

No angels sang. The criminals, on the other hand, were certainly in a celebratory mood. They laughed and congratulated her. It made her angry. When she first saw the oil from the lamp run out onto the floor, she thought it was fortunate that the flame had already been blown out. But now, Vivian retrieved the Deputy's box of matches from the desk top.

"No, Vivian!"

She frowned at Walt. The others looked at him, astonished and pleased that he knew her. Taking the keys off Earl's belt, Vivian spun toward the cells. The men quickly stretched out their arms for her hungrily - for her and the keys. "Right here, lady. Let us out. Unlock us. Be a doll."

Vivian stopped abruptly and then proceeded past their cell doors at a snail's pace. She did not give their arms a wide birth. Instead, she stared them each in the eye and strolled past with excessive slowness - close enough for their fingertips to touch the cloth of her sleeve.

Silenced, except for their soft throaty cooing, grunted oohs and hushed awes, they pressed their bodies into the bars as far as possible. She lingered there as they tried to reach her. Dirty fingernails brushed the bright print of her dress, but could not grasp. Still, they damned themselves for the effort. Vivian turned and shamelessly let them touch the fabric draped across her breasts. The men smiled and chuckled with approval.

Walt's heart pounded wildly in his chest - his gut ripped by sharp pains as if he'd been stabbed or kicked by a mule. His eyes lowered and his forehead slammed onto his hands, which now strangled the bars. He had seen too much - the darkness of her smile, her slithering movements, the smoke of hell swirling from her nostrils as she exhaled. He knew if he kept his eyes on her, daring to look closely, he'd be able to see scales forming on her skin.

Walt well remembered more than a few times when it took all his strength not to harm her. Each of those instances seemed more than he could bear, but were forgettable now, when he looked at them in hindsight from this moment.

When she ruined friendships, she ruined him. When she

ruined his job, she ruined him. When she destroyed all he'd built, she destroyed him. Walt had set to out simply care less, and eventually not to care at all, for the parts of him that she could touch. That, he thought, effectively stole her power. He convinced himself that what he was, and what he would always be, was never truly within her grasp - and so, her ways hurt him less with each assault. Walt wished it were true. But he was weary beyond words - and lately she had sunk to new lows.

Unlocking Walt's cell, Vivian swung the bars open and faced him, but he would not raise his eyes. She had substituted his escape for her own. Somehow she always found more than one way to betray. Grabbing his jacket he headed for the door - desperately longing for the gallows. His chance now lost, he would have to get her out of town before the neighbors reported what they saw. He brushed past her while mumbling to himself and to God. "Bitch stole my death."

The remaining prisoners again begged Vivian to release them. She flashed a loathsome look their way. They panicked and began yelling, "No! No!" as she struck a match and tossed it toward the spilled fuel, inching its

way toward them. Walt turned and grabbed the flame in flight within his grasp, snuffing it out - and then raised that fist to his wife. He ripped the box from her hands, throwing it against the furthest wall.

She hissed, "They deserve it."

Walt grabbed her arm roughly and led her out into the street. The gawking men were breathless but thankful.

"Seems the thing to do, Walt. After what they done."

Walt snarled, hurrying down the street with his hand cutting off her arm's circulation above the elbow - like a tourniquet. "Not a shred of dignity. You let them touch you."

"They was grabby. I'm within arm's reach of people everywhere I go. If I have to stay out of reach then I have to stay home - and you been sayin' I should get out more."

"You could have taken half a step back."

"They were in the wrong, Walter! They deserve to burn."

Walt turned and grabbed both her arms tight. He shook her. "You are wrong, Vivian! What do you deserve?"

She lowered her voice menacingly, "I never been

unfaithful to you. I don't want nobody else. I don't even want Lewis no more."

"So not wanting those men means you're faithful even though you let them touch you?"

Vivian wriggled out of his grasp. "I don't know what you're complainin' about, Walter. I got you out of jail."

Walt surprised her with the veracity and volume of his answer, "I didn't want out!" He turned to walk away from her and she began to kick at him again - but this time he raised his heel. Her shin made contact with enough force to drop her to the ground, crying out and cursing. She called him everything but a White man.

Walt did not help her up. He stood watching her writhe in pain. Neither one of them cared who might be watching. Vivian understood then what Rena and Thom went through in their arguments - wanting to fight even when anonymous shots were being fired and bullets zinged past their ears. She held her shin and hopped a few steps before deciding to try and put weight on that leg. Walt's behavior kept taking new turns. He was a surprise a minute and Vivian didn't know how to react. She couldn't undermine him if he stooped as low as she did.

Vivian had dumped the car with the broken window and found a sandy colored coupe. She parked it behind a building after seeing the Sheriff leave the jail earlier. Rubbing her leg she reluctantly pointed and said, "That's our ride." Having had more practice driving, Vivian got behind the wheel, even though blood trickled into her shoe.

Walt didn't need to ask about the car. Thieving was a habit she wasn't likely to outgrow. He couldn't count the times they had to move and change their names. All of his savings went toward smoothing ruffled feathers in her wake. He sat in the car and couldn't get comfortable. She had whittled him down to a nub. It needed to end.

At the edge of town, Walt filled the gas tank with a few dollars while Vivian tried to avert her eyes from the steeple of a church looming overhead. The cross on top stood tall and slender, set against a clear blue sky. Inspiring, as usual, but she felt as though God took aim with it today, and had her in its crosshairs. She still felt bad for the deputy.

Bells rang. Sunday morning - the day before another Christmas. Silently they drove out of town, half expecting the wail of sirens behind them. Walt pretended to read a

magazine on fly fishing which the owner left on the dash.

This frustrated Vivian since she expected him to eventually take pity on her bleeding leg and say something.

East, into the warming sun, the car coughed across the state line.

Chapter 36 - Crossing Lines

The drive to Torrington earlier that morning with a mission to rescue Walt had made Vivian imagine being truly alone for the first time. It was a sickening feeling, but she had him back. This time he didn't have to chase her. He didn't need a harness and bit to rein her back, or a pole to yank and reel in to make her flop and heel at his feet. This time it was Walt who sulked and slunk in the seat beside her. Everything seemed to be going well, despite the fact that carelessness had nearly sent him to the gallows - and callousness had made him like it. She would not make the same mistake again.

That dragging regret for her treatment of Walt over the years continued to overcome her as she thought of the men in the jailhouse. She shouldn't have let them touch her. It was excessive. Not really wanting to punish Walt anymore, she didn't understand why she couldn't stop herself. But he had made her mad when he told her no. She wanted to burn them for laughing at the Deputy. When they touched her they sealed their fate, but Walt saved them. She marveled that he would have really hanged for her. Was

he that sick of her, or that much in love? Either way, she would make it up to him somehow.

On a straight stretch of road between switchbacks Vivian steered the car with her knees as she buttoned her dress top and bottom, then slipped on her coat. Walt simply stared at the passing prairie and rolling hills. A heavy hand would now be needed to control his wife - for her own good. He must restrain her somehow, before she had a chance to misbehave again. She belonged to him, and he would make her remember.

Whatever she touched seemed to obey her and fall to ruin. The constant running made a proper house elusive. No reason to believe things would change. Walt sighed and again considered her fate. He could throttle her and toss her like a ragdoll to the back seat, turn the car around, lock himself in the third cell again - confess and wait for breakfast.

Vivian suggested they dump the car as soon as they could and catch a train anywhere but westward. Walt nodded - but they weren't near any depot. When they stopped for fuel, Vivian picked up a flyer inviting them to historical Horse Creek, just a few hours north toward the Dakotas. It

might be a place where they could get lost for awhile. Or maybe they should keep driving as far and fast as they could get.

She read the flyer to Walt, telling him it was the site of a large gathering - several Indian tribes smoking the peace pipe over eighty years ago with the likes of Jim Bridger. She thought he might find that interesting. His expression hadn't changed. He just kept staring at the gas pump. Indians were promised control of the Great Plains "as long as the river flows and the eagle flies" - plus a great deal of money each year to allow roads, forts and safe passage for settlers. The deal didn't last long. Of course, none of that was in the flyer.

Walt put the cap back on the tank and sighed about the Indians, knowing that it would have been more honorable to have killed every last one of them in the heat of battle, than to break a promise to a single one. Walt and Vivian had discussed Indians back when they participated in table tipping circles with friends early on in their marriage. Vivian felt it was impossible to steal from people who have no concept of ownership. Walt disagreed, knowing that the thief's knowledge was enough to make it so.

Vivian started the engine. Walt saw an eagle gliding overhead, casting its shadow on the coupe. It perched by the side of the road on a long dead lightning-struck tree - charred but still standing. From that branch, the bird raised its beak in the high air and cast a yellow eye on Walt. Smaller birds took care, fearing its mighty shadow. They knew that eagles earn their living by dishonest means - stealing food from other birds who hunt.

Instead of heading north, they decided to follow the Union Pacific tracks southeast to a depot. Knowing of Bailey Yard in North Platte, they could certainly disappear on any train they liked. By afternoon, the couple drove into a town that met their needs. Water gathered where the road sagged and had begun to freeze over again with the cooling air. It crunched beneath their feet as they left the coupe among other cars parked in front of a feed store. They walked half the little town to the rail yard - only stopping at the druggist's for sundries. Vivian picked up hair bleach, bandages and ointment. She would dye her hair the first chance she got, and Walt would need to shave his mustache. He put jerky on top of her selections.

At the depot, Walt bought two tickets east while

Vivian cleaned the blood from her shin in the ladies room, and put on the brassier she had stuck in her pocket at the five and dime. The train was crowded so Walt checked their baggage in and boarded quietly. They took seats with a view away from the depot. He rubbed his sore leg, and did not answer when Vivian asked what was wrong. Her leg still smarted as well.

While gazing out the window of the train amidst all the station bustle, Vivian refocused and saw her reflection in the glass, along with Walt's profile behind her. He seemed troubled, with eyes sad and tired. Not uncommon. She slid her soft hand over to the top of his worn hand, which rested on his thigh. Walt roughly flipped her hand back to her lap as if trying to avert the spread of her poison. Vivian had done that countless times. Then he crossed his arms over his chest. Vivian's heart pounded with actual surprise yet again, wondering why he would refuse a gesture of kindness after years of seeking the same. This grudge he held longer than most.

Vivian watched the glass and saw Walt slouch down in the seat and lay his head back, which bumped his cap slightly over his eyes. His head then lifted and his eyes

turned toward her.

"You might want to start wearin' gloves." He smiled. "They been runnin' ink on folks fingers and keepin' a file of the marks. They'll know all you touched and all you done."

Vivian tucked her fingertips into her fists. Walt's words slip out of a satisfied grin, and his wife watched. She looked at her fingers and then folded them across her middle beneath her arms. Walt usually came home with an interesting tidbit or two, retold from men at work who could read, but this particular news he inflicted. Purposely inflicted - she knew. He didn't say it to help her or please her or anything useful in his way of trying to be nice. He said it like he raised his heel to her shin outside the Sheriff's office. He said it to hurt. She wondered what she'd been touching. Stolen cars. A broken bottle. So many different things.

Vivian again turned her gaze to the glass, this time to see through it, ignoring their reflections. In the distance, smoke stacks reached skyward, emitting signals of varying shades into the clouds, from white as snow to black as sin - yet the high heavens did not turn gray. Sunshine

glistened on the tracks ahead like flaming mirrors -
brightened further with the little bits of remaining snow.
Trains carrying dreams, all dressed up, stood in rows ready
to serve. She determined that the very next thing she
would steal must be a pair of white Sunday, church-worthy
gloves.

Chapter 37 - Tracks

Rhythmic grunting of the train called out to aimless youth, suffering from itchy feet that soon turned tired. They desired a free ride to where the grass was greener. Swarms of these youth rose from the shrubs and tall grass to practice a dangerous restlessness. A personal adventure in loneliness.

While on the platform, edges of alleys and in shadows, shiftless vagabonds peered sideways at passersby and then ducked their eyes under the brim of their hats. Tramping around the country, they learned to sum a person at a glance and discern between green vulnerability, predatory trouble, and those with a do-gooder nature. They worked hard at travel, and stayed dirty, hungry and cold. Most weren't old enough to shave - perhaps as young as ten, still sporting chubby cheeks. Some carried a bundle tied with a rope like a postal package, while older, tougher looking men toted larger bedrolls under their arm. Their hard faces were tanned and knowing, and their backs already bent from picking fields.

A few may have been thinking of returning to their

families - which could be seen as an outrage. Their wives and children would have either starved already or managed on the charity of their neighbors. Other women proved he wasn't needed by somehow surviving without him. Some families were better off for their men's leaving.

Bums emerging from the shadows at each stop were covered in muscles and scars which embraced them, hidden beneath layers of clothing - but for many, elbows and knees peeked out of tattered clothing. A few with the gift of gab could charm their way into getting a soda pop. Leaning on platform posts, they drank like kings, and sentimentally thought of home.

Reliant on charity even when field work could be had, they begged at back doors where women made sandwiches for armies of the hungry who hoped for permission to sleep in barns. In cities, the missions would let men in if they were sober, and served hot meals after sermons. A cot for the night could be secured only after taking a bath. Some were turned away for refusing to remove their clothing for a much needed washing. They feared their belongings, all that they owned, would be stolen - so they slept out of doors with the filth from the days before.

The boys who were new to such freedom - the ones who bore signs of recent mothering - looked the most lost, and were the least cautious. The most heartbroken boys were not those who knew they would swallow their pride and return home a failure, but were those who had no home even if they had wished to return. Although emotionally stunted, these boys could scope out and smell what others missed - food and money and a corner to curl up undisturbed.

Freckled boys with masses of unkept hair under caps saw Walt and Vivian - a do-gooder and trouble - both trying as much as themselves to avoid eye contact with officials. Vivian had no use for any of these hobos.

As the train pulled out of the yard, they passed small groves of trees where older men had set up camp. Probably, they were only half the age they appeared. A life of hard roads could age a person faster than anything. Men who were thirty looked sixty. Women didn't fare any better. Their faces showed not the years, but the mileage.

Vivian saw a group of young boys with dimples standing in a huddle - showing several inches of bare bony limbs extending below outgrown pant legs. They had grown taller

and thinner, needing to keep their pants up with a belt of rope. The impression Vivian had of this particular group was that it was a family of boys, traveling with their father - perhaps also a few daughters dressed as boys for safety's sake. The man had a broad smile spread between high cheekbones above a jaunty chin. His eyes and brow pointed toward high center as if they were slipping easily toward his ears in a jolly expression. Such a face full of angles, licking beans from his fingers, and making promises to the children.

These camps enclosed by clumps of trees were run by old buzzards who would die there, stubbled, toothless, gray-eyed and alone. Until then, they shared their shaving gear and a pot of stew if a guest contributed a scrap of something.

Passing one of these camps, Vivian saw a scraggly man playing the mouth harp next to others trying their hand at a game of horseshoes. Others tried to get some shut-eye despite the clangor of the occasional ringer. Some tried to ford the cold river against the current to position themselves with advantage and be ready when the train came close - before it got up too much speed.

The train would pass many cowtowns with contented stick whittlers. Many were simple bumpkins with no ambition to do further - but whatever they set themselves at they proved to be hard workers. They were not considered no-hoppers.

The train took a corner and a long, lone figure was seen to fly past the windows from the roof with a wild holler. There was a scuffling commotion atop, which settled down quickly. He could not be saved. People on the train strained to see where the body landed, and if it was broken too badly. Comments from passengers sounded. "Happens rather often - poor soul."

Not only did hobos take care not to be trampled by faster runners bent on reaching a car, but also to avoid falling and have a hand or foot crushed beneath the steel wheels. Then, the job is to climb to a height undetected, or else be beaten back by rail detectives carrying lanterns, rifles and clubs.

A man simply wished to lie in the sun, travel the countryside, be rocked to sleep by the movement of a train - only to be thrown by a curve. It was a tragedy. If not killed instantly on the rocks, how long would he lie there

wounded, suffering alone, before the birds, coyotes and bobcats came to finish him off?

Walt thought of his friend, Jule, and how he would have bet on how the fella landed - face in the dirt or no. Back on his feet or no. Walt missed Jule. He even missed the road work.

Someone offered hope, "He probably got up. Twisted ankle is all." Others were not so certain. Some prayed for the unnamed soul lying beside the tracks between towns. Everyone knew the old saying: There, but for the grace of God, go I.

Vivian wondered how close she and Walt were to being in the same dire situation as those bums riding on top of their rail car. It would only take a matter of days to be as hungry, a matter of weeks to be as dirty, and a matter of months to be in such rags. At what point would they feel like kings if given a bottle of soda out of pity, or let to sleep in a barn out of the rain. She supposed it would happen rather quickly, and bitterness would set in.

They were just as uprooted as the hobos. For many of them, though, calamity had befallen them, causing their sad state. Her case, she knew well, was her own doing. She

left behind a perfectly good tent with a stove and rocker. A soft bed, a cache of food, tools and sewing supplies. Assets abandoned again. She kept derailing a good man with a job - and it finally stirred her conscience.

The sudden sentiment shocked and angered her, yet her eyes moistened with sorrow. Mortified that Walt might see her, she turned to the window as if hunting distant jackrabbits or searching for the outline of mountains or towns on the horizon.

Dusty faces atop the train were being washed clean as well. Tears slid silently down cheeks in tracks of their making - wiped away with the approach of the next town. With each stop, Walt and Vivian stretched their legs a bit but remained on the train as passengers exited and others boarded in new towns. They regained their seat as the whistle blew. Walt slouched in his seat again to sleep, with his cap over his eyes as the train began to roll again.

It seemed as though they were safe, until a tall augustly figure in overalls appeared in front of them. It was Thom. He looked fit to be tied - sort of crazy-mad. He slowly sat opposite Walt, next to an annoyed lady with

much powder, who, after smelling him, snuggled closer to her window. From a baggy pocket Thom retrieved a revolver, and pointed it at Vivian. She elbowed Walt sharply, which bolted him awake. The other woman was promptly shushed by a menacing glance from Thom.

Vivian asked in a slow hush, "Why, Thom, what ever possessed you to travel out this - "

Thom had been riding the rails for several days on borrowed money, praying to find her and dispense Justice. He interrupted, "Like the preacher said. It's all perfect."

Walt spoke softly, "Thomas, you got to put that down 'fore you get yourself hung for bein' damned rash."

Thom ignored Walt's warning and pierced Vivian with his words. "You done killt my Rena. The Cowper kid saw ya with the General's wheelbarrow. Saw ya clear even in fog and night. Found blood on it, too - after that little bastard finally thought to talk. Watched ya pour whiskey down my Rena and take a swig from it yerself 'fore tossin' it aside. Nearly hit the kid, said he, an' I believe. So do ever' other body. Kid got a right good look."

Vivian countered shakily, "That Cowper kid is crazy,

Thom - he's all lip, always tellin' stories - just wantin' attention."

Thom ignored her explanations - they were the same excuses he always used against Rena when she caught him up to no good. Crazy. Liar. Attention Seeker.

Vivian tried to change the subject and buy some time. "What was he doing there anyway? How old *is* that kid?"

Thom shook his head. "Settin' a box snare, wantin' for rabbits, but caught you instead."

Walt saw in Thom's eye that his thoughts had traveled to his finger. Walt flung himself forward, tipping the gun upward with his left hand and punching Thom in the nose with his right. The gun went off, and shot a hole through the ceiling - causing those on top to scramble and jump to another car. The shot caused quite a commotion inside the car as well. Thom's head hit the woman next to him and toppled her hat to one side. She screamed and shoved him off of her. In what seemed to be one motion she leapt over the shoulders of those sitting behind her - people who were already in motion, turning in a ducking fashion as they saw her coming.

Walt had taken the gun, and punched Thom again as he

tried to stand. This time his head slammed against the window and left a wave of chips surrounding a small hole. Lightning bolt cracks raced across the glass to the frame. Thom bounced back and tried to take a swing at Walt but a man behind him caught his arm and held. Thom gave up with less struggle than Walt expected and held his bleeding nose as he slid back into the seat.

Walt yanked Vivian's arm and darted down the aisle to the back of the car. Frantically he shoved men aside who stood in his way straining to see - and stepped over the many legs of women strewn in the aisle as they tried to duck behind seating. Between rail cars, Walt told Vivian they would need to jump. Conductors and detectives would arrive shortly. The train had already picked up speed and the jump seemed an enormous distance, flying by at a blur below.

Vivian looked back and watched people subduing Thom. She felt they might charge him with only disturbing the peace if he didn't confess to trying to murder her. But the look on his face said otherwise. As Vivian hesitated, she looked past Walt blocking the door, and thought she saw the Reverend John standing with Thom in the car beyond

those trying to approach. He stood and stared, and their eyes met. He wore a look of knowing that chilled her worse than the cold air.

Walt took a strong hold on her arms and turned her body to face a patch of trees. The ground raced and roared below her feet. The dizzying sight sent a tingle through her thighs as her knees weakened. She looked back, but the Reverend John was no longer there in the crowd - and that felt even worse. She wondered if she'd seen him at all.

Vivian thought of their bags as Walt picked her up and threw her away from the train. Things that could never be replaced. Walt had waited for the tallest part of a drifted snow bank to come along and that's where she landed. All they had now was the clothes on their back, Vivian's handbag and Thom's gun - which Walt waved at the people to hold them back.

He jumped near her and both rolled down the other side of the snow hill into the tree line. Cold and shaken, they were relatively unharmed and disappeared into the darkness of the trees as their train rushed into the distance.

Chapter 38 - Quick Draw

There wasn't much to discuss in the woods. The plan included hiding, running, finding shelter and laying low. Vivian could tell that Walt was in no mood to hear her ideas on the matter. Fortunately, she agreed with the direction he led - although his pace indicated he wouldn't mind if she fell behind. Occasionally he would turn to scowl at her progress. They headed for the road, and would try to hitch a ride before word reached the local law. Train depots had telegraphs, but they passed messages to the men on trains by a system of snagging notes on loops held out as they went by. Vivian figured time was on their side - temporarily.

Walt wondered what would become of Thom and Rena's children when Thom went to jail for shooting the roof of the train. There was an orphanage run by the Episcopalians in Laramie - a place for orphans or otherwise homeless children. Of course, the other campers might keep them while waiting for Thom to return - unaware of the mess he was in now. On the other hand, he might have made his intentions clear before he left. Walt climbed the

embankment to the road and stuck the gun in his coat pocket. He waved down a vehicle.

A clean cut salesman with a ready smile welcomed the ruffled couple aboard the ship that he "steered through troubled waters toward financial security." Vivian smelled a sales pitch coming. "What evils put you two out in the cold on Christmas eve?"

Vivian had a lie prepared but Walt glared at her as soon as she opened her mouth. He said, "We can pay for fuel."

The salesman laughed and nodded, having heard the subtleties in voice and gesture that signaled a change of subject. He introduced himself and proceeded to explain all his travels and adventures as if they were a Hollywood picture show. He left nothing out - nor did he neglect to push his wares, which waited in the trunk for some lucky couple looking to make their mark in the world. He patted his case sitting beside him and asked, "How are you fixed for insurance?"

The salesman worked this road and knew every town and pot hole on it west of Omaha. Vivian enjoyed his repertoire of tales but he only managed to give Walt a

headache. And the car was headed west - the wrong way if they wanted to avoid Wyoming law. The salesman hadn't sold anything but was glad for the company. He let them out in Gothenburg - a little Swedish spot in the road.

Vivian immediately scouted the area for a car. Walt looked defeated, but would rally again. He stared down a fence line and said he could get work in the mines. "Uranium up in Crow Butte. Bricks at Yankee Hill over Lincoln way, but that's kinda far away. I might could get back on at Happy Jack Chalk. Scotia ain't too far from here."

Vivian looked him over. Sleepy and stooped, letting his words slip out of his mouth on their own. Sad, thinking that work is the answer to everything. Yet, she didn't have a better idea. If he didn't go to work, she would be stuck with him all day and couldn't know how that'd be any fun. And their money would run out. Vivian knew he had his money pouch strapped to his middle. She felt it when he grabbed her on the train. But she didn't know how much he had, or if she could talk him into buying her more clothes. He would stop her from stealing and lying - and so money would be spent on his plan.

She had her own plan, but had to find an opportunity to ditch him and find a car, then come back for him. He'd get in, being at that point hot to get out of town to save her.

"Walt, we should get a bite to eat someplace where I can freshen up." She waited for him to nod and move, nod and sigh then move, frown and nod or sigh - but nothing happened. "Walt? Sun'll be goin' down soon. I'm hungry and dirty. You can figure out where you wanna work while you're eating." She saw him thinking. Eventually, Walt straightened his frame and looked up and down the streets. Vivian pointed to a diner she spotted with a parking lot on the side rather than in front.

Her plan worked as she expected.

Vivian tried to be nice - racing down the highway in a sedan with the sun at their backs. Walt looked like he might vomit up his dinner, furious that she once again roped him into being an accomplice. They headed for Lincoln. Brick-making there seemed far enough away from Wyoming and even from Thom, who rode the rails searching for revenge.

The escape was short-lived though, as the car began to

sputter and slow. Vivian pulled over onto the sandy shoulder of the road. Walt went to raise the hood and look over the engine but found everything in order. It must be out of fuel. Vivian flicked the gas gauge, which made the arrow fall and swing loose, pointing to the bottom of the glass.

Walt slammed the hood and stifled his rage as best he could. His body became stiff and he buried his head in his hands. He doubled over and moaned. Hornet mad, Walt spun around and kicked the grill several times as if he were trying to kick in a door. He brought his hands to his face again before taking out the gun. Vivian's first thought was to duck down, but instead, she got out of the car in case he intended to shoot. She felt confident that he was mad at the car and not her, even though she chose it poorly.

Walt stomped toward the embankment and threw the gun onto the front seat, then silently faced the farmland with his hands in his pockets. They had never been so broke. They owned more even when they first married. All they could do now was hitch another ride, preferably headed east. But the chilly highway lay in silence.

Vivian had never tried to cheer Walt up before - she didn't know if she could. Cowboy movies were his favorites. She suggested playfully, "Check the back for a rope. You can teach me tricks like Will Rogers while we wait on a ride. Maybe we can do a travelin' show." Walt didn't move, but kept his back to her.

Vivian picked up the gun and said, "Bet ya I can twirl and holster it without droppin' it." Vivian started to twirl the heavy pistol on her finger but it was awkward. She dropped it and said, "Best two out of three."

Walt turned halfway toward her. "That's not a toy. Quit horsin' around."

"I know you like Gene Autry. Yodel for me, Walt." She tried to get the gun to spin, but it kept flopping heavily to one side of her hand.

Walt didn't want to yodel, but sighed deeply instead. "We should start walkin' back to Gothenburg. It'll be cold tonight."

"Yodel, Walt."

"I don't want to yodel. What's wrong with you?"

"Come on. You've been sour for years."

Walt scoffed, but didn't want to argue the point. God

and everybody knew the sour one.

Vivian kept working on her twirl - trying to perfect it so the weapon could be holstered in her pocket. She began to sing. *"Tramping down the highway, traveling day and night. I don't know where I'm going, but I'll get there all right."*

Walt kept his back to her but stirred with amazement at what he was hearing. He'd heard her hum, but she had never sang before - not in church, not anywhere.

"I started out to roamin' 'cause I had no place to go. Now I've turned out, to be a yodelin' hobo."

Walt couldn't help but smile when she started to yodel.

"Ahl-dee-oh-lay-eee-hee, ahl-dee-oh-lay-eee-ho."

Her voice cracked on the high notes. It was one of those situations where a body had to either laugh or cry. Walt almost felt like joining her fun. She got the gun to twirling fairly well and she tried stopping it short by grasping the handle on its way around.

"I hear a Frisco freight train, and it's calling me. When the sun sinks in the West, into that dark blue sky, Just say that I'm a hobo, and will be till I die. Ahl-dee-

oh-lay-hee-hee, oh-dah-lay-hee-hee, Oh-dah-lay-heee."

She hit the wrong notes as if she'd never heard the song before. Walt had to chuckle and decided to show her how it's done. He began the first notes, which stopped her singing. She smiled and listened to his perfect delivery. They shared a laugh as Walt turned to face her.

Vivian now wanted to show him her twirl. "I think I got it. Watch."

Walt's smile fell to concern. She held it directly between them. Across the hood of the car, she alternated its business end at both of them - spinning fast.

"Vivian!"

She'd gotten it going again hard - then spread her fingers out to stop the handle. Grabbing it perfectly, she looked up and smiled, but her expression wavered as the gun went off. The deafening noise startled them both.

Blood seeped through Walt's shirt, directly over his heart. He looked down and rocked forward a bit, leaning against the car. Vivian shook the gun loose from her grip - almost throwing it as it hit the hood ornament and dropped down the small embankment. She covered her face, screaming.

"Walt!" Vivian ran to his side as he turned and tried to reach the door handle, but dropped to his knees. She tried to lift him, but Walt's weight slumped into the gravel beside the car. He faced the fields and closed his eyes. Vivian felt a great breath escape Walt as his head lay on the wheel well.

A wailing cry rose from her belly and shook her throat. She stuffed her fingers through her hair and held her face as tears ran down her cheeks and fell on the running board. A few cars drove by but didn't see Vivian kneeling on the other side of the car next to Walt.

She couldn't stay there. A little lace rose from Rena's funeral had been snuck out of the coffin during prayer. As a child Vivian had taken to keeping her eyes open during prayers to watch out for heathens who don't close their eyes. Usually, she didn't catch any. And Rena had plenty of roses. Vivian had it in her purse, but now tucked it in a button hole of Walt's coat. She felt glad she had the rose to leave on him. He certainly was too heavy to think of burying.

Vivian kissed Walt's forehead and petted his face, whispering, "I'm sorry." Then she wrestled his money pouch

from his waist and went to find the gun. That took some doing, and her stockings snagged on thorny bushes. She hadn't noticed that she'd disturbed Walt's slumber and his eyelids struggled to open.

Chapter 39 - His Rib

Vivian pulled her coat tight and thought it remarkable how strong and warm Walt felt when she held him. She only rarely got that close to him. Her plan sat simple. Catch a ride, hopefully with a lone man like the salesman earlier that day. She'd be friendly. There was nothing else to do. If anyone accused her of anything, she'd say Walt forced her. That plan reeked with betrayal that Vivian couldn't stomach so she immediately shook it off. She sincerely felt sorry for shooting him. The sound of the shot still echoed in her ears and caused her heart pain that stuck. And Walt so dearly worried about his good name.

Besides, there were those three witnesses who saw her kill the Deputy. She could make them out to be liars easy enough, but her prints were on the lamp. Details needed to be worked out and she could think on it while walking further down the road. Vivian felt aimless - without anchor.

Walt struggled onto his feet and saw no sign of Vivian at the car. And his money pouch went missing. He held his

chest and felt the warm blood turn cold on his fingers in the evening air. Looking up and down the roadway, he saw a speck of red in the distance. Figuring it for his wife's skirt hanging below her coat, he managed to put one foot in front of the other and follow. The pain nearly dropped him with every breath.

His dog-bit leg pain was nearly forgotten in comparison to his chest wound. The last time a dog bit him he had neglected to wash the wound properly. The skin healed hard, but underneath, an abscess ate at his flesh. By the time he decided to get to a doctor, the leg needed opening. When done, the doc found rotting flesh. He started cutting and told Walt to holler when he felt anything, because then the knife would have reached parts still alive. When he finished slicing, Walt had a hole in his leg that he could bury his thumb inside.

Somehow, the red blotch in the distance became larger. Surely Vivian walked faster than he was able. But there it was - slowly growing - but darker as the sun went down. He felt the loss of time in many ways - feeling as though he let so many people down. His aunt Roxy never got her tree house. His children never got a proper marker. He wanted

never to forget them: Ruth, Ruby and Roy.

Walt thought to paint Vivian in a grave with a beautiful sunset in the background - such as the one he now walked toward. Brilliant oranges and golds. He'd give her a nice shade tree in the painting, since she liked the dark. And a river not too far away. It'd be a comfortable place. No, no river would do. Rivers bring people and Vivian doesn't like company. Walt felt a stinging thirst.

He could have kicked himself for not thinking to honk the car horn when he had the chance to call Vivian back. Walt tried to whistle but his throat and lips were parched. He checked his pockets for the gun, but remembered Vivian had it last. He didn't know what he'd do with her when he caught her. Mostly he just wanted to lie down. The expression on her face as the gun went off told Walt that it was an accident - but he could never be too sure with her.

Vivian sat on a rock by the side of the road to rest and rub her feet - more sore than cold. That's when she saw a shadowy shape on the road, lit only by moonlight. A man staggered toward her, silently, cutting a figure like her Walt. Vivian put her shoes back on and touched the gun

in her pocket reassuringly. Soon, she heard a raspy voice call out - sounding angry.

"You got me good, Viv."

Vivian stood sharply. "Walt?" She approached him hesitatingly. Stunned, she found herself unable to speak much better than he. "What are you thinkin', Walt? I saw you dead."

She wrapped her arms around his body, making him flinch and moan. With her help, he made it to the rock and sat down.

"I'm sorry I shot you, Walt. I didn't mean it."

Walt wondered about that. He'd felt for years that she was working up to it.

"You need a doctor. I know how you hate to go, but that's that."

"I know one in Newcastle that can get me fever powders. We can be sure fever's comin' if it ain't here already. He won't care about circumstances neither."

"Oh, Walt. There's doctors everywhere. I can find 'em, and they can be talked into bein' quiet." She took Walt's arm and helped lift him to his feet. Her hand touched his back and it felt wet as well. When she

checked, she saw that the bullet had gone through. "You got a sizeable hole in your back, too."

"You shot me twice?"

"No, I did not! Still, I don't know why you ain't dead."

They walked for an hour or more, but the lights from the little town were encouraging when they came into view. Vivian left Walt on the first bench they came to while she raced around trying to find a doctor. People were closing up shop early to get home for Christmas Eve supper. The streets were nearly deserted. In the larger cities, shops stayed open longer for last minute shopping - but in the smaller towns no one wanted to keep employees from their families.

Vivian did find a doctor - none too happy about a last minute customer. He sent his two eldest sons with a stretcher, and they followed Vivian.

Walt dozed off while waiting on the bench. Seeing that help had arrived, he relaxed and fairly passed out. Walt hardly stirred when the young men laid him out and carried him home. Vivian watched the doctor look at the chest wound and shake his head, tsking to himself. He sat

at his desk and shuffled through piles of papers. "Where do you want the body shipped?"

Vivian furrowed her brow in disbelief. "Shipped?"

"Apparent gunshot. Straight through the heart. No hope." He saw Vivian's stunned expression. "I'm sorry for your loss. I assumed you knew him."

Vivian blurted, "He walked miles to get here!"

The doctor wrinkled up his nose to stop his glasses from falling off, as they slid rather quickly when his eyes widened. "Oh." He rolled his squeaky chair back to the patient. "I guess I better take another look."

Vivian stepped aside as Walt was examined properly. She sat in a huff at the foot of the table where he lay. Looking around the doctor's small office, judging every aspect of his life, helped pass the time and made her feel better. He probably felt rushed, wanting to get home to his supper. Still, Vivian loathed him.

She remembered a fleeting thought to give up killing as a New Year's resolution - but it wasn't New Year's yet. She picked up a small piece of cotton wadding that the doctor had used. She tossed it into the corner of the room and determined that she wouldn't kill the doctor outright

since he was helping Walt, but she would do it if she returned and that cotton was still in the corner. Good help wasn't what it used to be.

The doctor mumbled, "Who shot him?"

"It was an accident. He thinks he's Tom Mix."

"Likes playing cowboy, huh? Well, there's nothing to dig out, and nothing important got hit." He explained that the bullet nicked a rib, rode it around and went out his back. Walt will be quite sore for some time, and he gave Vivian medication for pain and infection.

Then the doctor made an observation. "Doesn't look self-inflicted though. No powder burns. He probably was practicing his quick draw with a buddy. I shouldn't tell you this, but when a man isn't forthright with the truth it's probably because he did something incredibly stupid."

Vivian thanked him for his insight, and said she suspected something like that.

The doctor finished cleaning the wound and wrapped a long bandage around Walt to hold down the taped gauze.

"How do you plan to settle the bill?"

Vivian wanted to tell him that her dead husband handled all the finances, but she paid the man and slipped

a rubber model of an eyeball into her pocket when he wasn't looking. She asked if his sons wouldn't mind carrying Walt to the nearest hotel. Vivian figured if Walt wasn't going to die she'd better find someplace warm and dry to keep him. She just needed whiskey and bed strips to change the bandages.

Room-service sounded good, too.

Chapter 40 - Thorns

Vivian gave the hotel clerk false names, completely different from the false names given to the doctor. Walt was carried up a flight of stairs carefully while Vivian ordered a steak dinner with all the fixings. She also asked for extra sheets and plenty of water for washing. As the clerk said, "We hope you enjoy your stay at the Wild Horse," Vivian nodded at him and took a bottle of whisky from the counter to the room. She needed it for Walt. The doctor had told her to use a hand full of salt in a quart of water to clean the wound, but Vivian didn't see how that would dull the pain and let him sleep.

Vivian felt that the clerk would be trouble. She surmised his type. Normally she'd welcome such a temptation, an opportunity to teach the man some manners while prying his cash and car keys from his pockets. She imagined him standing wobbly in her doorway, staring at a hole in his chest made from the steak knife he would give her. He'd be yet another loose end to clear up while she chewed her supper. Even if he heard news of the law looking for their descriptions, he wouldn't report them

until he had his way.

Vivian wrestled Walt's bloody coat and shirt from him and offered him the whiskey whenever she saw his eyes open. She tucked him into bed while exchanging Christmas well-wishing with the doctor's sons before they left with their stretcher. She covered Walt with plenty of blankets and adjusted his pillow, propping him up enough to take his medicine later.

For a moment, Vivian thought she heard angels again, but decided quickly that they were Christmas carolers singing. If she strained far enough, she could see them through the window, making their way below in the street. It reminded her of home, and she longed for such a place. Her parents had one. Skipper had one. Walt had promised her a house on the fading frontier. Despite all appearances, she really did want to settle down and give Walt more children - hopefully, someplace warm - but always, always near trains and church bells.

The clerk arrived with her dinner, but he forgot the sheets. He asked how her brother was feeling, and that took Vivian by surprise until she remembered that's how she presented herself. She told him they really needed those

sheets, and probably more blankets.

The steak would be saved for Walt, but Vivian decided to start eating without him. An idea came to her while stirring corn into mashed potatoes. The spoon handle she held was plain and smooth, and her buttery thumb print appeared there. She figured this was what Walt talked about on the train - the need for gloves. Skipper's spoon in her pocket matched the hotel spoon in every way, except for the rose raised up at the end of the handle. The idea trumped her hunger - so she pulled the candle close.

Vivian placed the spoon into a glass where the rose would be just over the flame. She heated the spoon for some time until she could feel the other end getting hot as well. Then she wrapped her thumb several times with cloth and picked up the spoon, taking care to place the rose directly on one of her fingertips. As expected, she bolted in pain for the burned finger, and shook her hand madly, but finally sank it into the pitcher of water. Upon examination, a lovely rose print adorned her finger.

She re-heated the spoon and swallowed some of Walt's pain medicine. He would have the rest of the whiskey poured directly into his bloodstream through his wounds

when she cleaned him and changed his bandages. He could sleep off the whiskey - but Vivian needed a clear head.

Between finger decorating, she doused a washcloth with cold water and dabbed Walt's face, cooling his fever. As she continued this, stroking his face and letting the water push illness from him, the last of the splinter worked its way from her palm.

Walt closed his eyes, unable to tell whether Vivian's hand or his own stroked his brow. Surely it wouldn't be hers - but it felt nice. Drifting in and out of sleep Walt realized she stood over him, smiling strangely. Not like her at all, he thought. It was a tender smile. The sight sobered him into wakefulness. To his surprise, she actually twirled her fingers round locks of his hair, shushing him to sleep. Whatever had gotten into her, Walt couldn't tell. She'd shot him, doctored him, washed him, whisky'd him, and tucked him into bed. Affection: definitely odd. So Walt just closed his eyes to enjoy it - resigned to the fact that it might be her way of giving a dog a juicy bone before putting him out of his misery. Yes, Vivian would probably finish him off this time for sure. He'd waited years for it, but still, recent events

left him confused.

The clerk knocked softly. Vivian was eager to begin tearing sheets in preparation to change Walt's bandages. She slid herself away from Walt's side while he imagined more gunfire. The rapping continued. It took all of Walt's strength to keep his eyes open. He watched his wife smooth her hair and adjust her breasts higher in her brassiere before swiping something from the tray.

Walt identified it soon enough. Vivian clutched a long knife behind her back. The blade flashed rays of light and made Walt wince until he lay his head back into the soft linen. No longer feeling much pain from the bullet, he figured a knife was just as well this time - quieter than a gun. A woman's weapon. He sighed thinking of her weapon of passion and considered rolling over so he wouldn't be likely able to fight and save himself. He just wanted to sleep. She answered the door.

Vivian spoke softly to someone hidden behind the open door. They spoke in whispers, but Walt heard the timbre of a man's voice - unmistakable, regardless of the songlike quality with which he spoke. Vivian held the door with her foot, not letting it swing too far. Walt watched her

stretch her long slender fingers across the hilt of the knife and then draw her fist tight again, working the handle as if playing a musical instrument. It was then Walt heard carolers in the street beyond his window and saw snowflakes flutter softly. He wondered if he'd make it to Christmas.

Suddenly it occurred to Walt that Vivian intended the knife for the man at the door. It did sound like the visitor wanted in; yet Vivian's hair swayed back and forth as if refusing a visitor. She turned her body away from his advancing fingers sliding along her waist. No, Walt decided wearily: she simply doesn't want to be interrupted when asking for a divorce by knife.

Perhaps she'd just tease the visitor until he pushes his way into the room. Then she would feel justified in exorcising evil from the world. Walt figured she'd already sized him for cash and a car. Eventually he lifted his head from the comfort of his pillow. The room spun, distorting the lines of furnishings and blurring colors as his eyes seemed to wobble in their sockets. He tried to focus on how Vivian busied her other hand, but his eyes refused to cooperate. Walt didn't doubt that his wife

would be playing with her neckline and buttons. Or maybe the stranger's belt buckle.

Straining to sit up, Walt dropped his legs off the bed's edge to the floorboards below. He wanted a few more swigs of whiskey for his effort - and Vivian didn't take notice. Blood seeped through the bandages crossing Walt's chest and he began to consider the situation more clearly. If Vivian killed either himself or the man at the door, or even both if she were so moved, and if he were no longer able to protect her - being dead - what would become of her? This was the sobering question.

Vivian told the stranger how flattered she felt that he'd be pleased to join her for dinner, but she assured him that she was married. The man scoffed that her husband must be an imbecile for letting her out of his sight. Walt then figured no one heard the bed springs squeak - perhaps due to the carolers outside, growing even louder as they neared. Vivian's chin rose and her nostrils flared in the high air. Walt became afraid for her. Certainly she planned to stab the man right there in the doorway, and Walt hadn't the strength to whisk her out of town again - especially not at this hour. Not with snow coming down.

Not with a hole in his chest and a bigger one in his back.
Not on Christmas Eve.

Walt couldn't protect her in his present condition - especially if she planned to do him in as well. He imagined seeing her knife move swiftly and how the stranger would come into view as she tugged his belt toward her. The man would drop to his knees with a thud, grabbing a fist full of skirt. She'd snarl some little bruising word like "Typical!" and smile that awful little smile that Walt had seen so often. Walt desperately wanted to believe her story about his children. Yet could he ever be certain? He figured some people were just born bad, so God can show off the good and to give the righteous something to do. He knew of a few of her killings for sure, but now, in this moment, he had never been so near - close enough to prevent her misdeeds. Before, he'd been a step or two behind, cleaning the mess in her wake.

Recalling that Nebraska had an electric chair, Walt shuddered to think of the indignities the state would visit upon his wife. In that moment, he knew what must be done. This must end. His thoughts hovered madly over the electric chair. He'd seen photos of the murderess Ruth

Snyder strapped to one. Vivian shouldn't kill anyone in a state boasting one of those machines. Portions of her body would need to be shaved, including the head. Smoke and the smell of burning flesh - a return to the gruesome act of burning offenders at the stake. And these chairs often did result in flames. The action against the heart, he'd heard, would be invasive - not like a bullet that leaves a damaging hole. No, this chair produced lightening that over-stimulates the heart. A shame, Walt felt, that when electricity could counter-shock a stopped-heart and so give it life, it should also be used to kill. What brings light should not bring darkness.

Walt approved of a properly executed hanging. That alone remained reliably quick and painless - with no blood. He further estimated that a firing squad would not be a terrible way to go. And drowning is relatively quick - going out in water, the same as how one arrives.

Hanging was the most economical way since a rope is reusable, like the guillotine. The sheer spectacle of that made sense to some degree. Walt had heard of noble men telling their hooded executioner not to feel bad for their work, saying, "You send me to God." That kind didn't go

kicking and screaming to their death; rather, they knelt under the falling blade and said final prayers.

But guillotines were messy and didn't keep the promise of immediate death. Still, it was better than hacking a head off with a dull axe. Yes, people fell in love with machines. Hanging had lost its appeal for lack of lights and levers, bells and whistles. They forgot that doing it properly with mathematics made it a science. Still, a rope lacked pizzazz and death had to be modernized.

Science changed so much of life. Only a grave illness was more punishing than death by innovation. Illness: a retribution from within, as if the body knew the secret crimes and festered with them for years. Passing then became a blessed gift. Even being fed to lions was quicker than an illness. Death unfairly took some more slowly than others - playing with a person cruelly.

Walt imagined what it'd be like to sit down for his death - in either the chair or gas chambers. A cold chill rushed through him with that memory. The horrors of gas held the echo of the trenches. What would they think of next?

Still woozy, the room blurred to the point that Walt

needed to close his eyes. He shook his head sadly about people going to their death no longer standing but sitting. Eventually, he mused, the condemned might lie down for their execution. Actually lie down for it! No more sudden drop of a trap door, or even the slice of an axe. No more flames and sizzling meat. No, if they were to lie down for it, they'd be stroked gently - even patted kindly with soft words to accompany them to the other side.

Walt imagined a prisoner stretched out on a bed, ready to receive a medicinal cure for his life, but being lulled to sleep first. Deception. Betrayal. Like Vivian stroking his brow with affection. Those executioners, so polished and proud of their achievements, wearing angelic white instead of black. And so the dark duty would be sterilized - but not for the sake of the condemned. Clean and tidy only for show. But no matter how hard they'd try, they couldn't keep their hands clean. The steps of their ritual would leave a large stain that can't be washed away. So many steps. The more, the better. Each bit of progress ticked off with notations on clipboards so demise could be charted.

Walt slowly shook off the thought of being nursed to

death. He blamed the whisky. At that moment Walt realized that he was actually waiting for Vivian to come finish him off and end his promises. He couldn't truly be that tired.

Vivian closed the door and locked it while listening to retreating footsteps in the hall. She turned to lean against the wall and saw Walt sitting on the edge of the bed. As carolers sang "*Silent night, holy night,*" Vivian marveled at a never before seen countenance on her husband's face. Not angry. Not quite sad. Walt stood, reeking with determination.

Vivian rushed the knife back onto the dinner tray - hoping he didn't see her smiling at the clerk. As Walt approached her slowly, he felt woozy, and the room started to spin. Nevertheless, their eyes remained locked until their bodies formed one shadow on the wall.

Walt reached for her throat and Vivian wondered whether she'd pushed him too far this time. Or perhaps it was the whiskey mixed with whatever that quack doctor gave him. He seemed vulnerable. Not a good sign - no longer stoic. No longer predictable. Had he gone mad or finally come to his senses?

The carolers finished singing "*All is calm, all is*

bright" as Vivian felt Walt's fingers pressing tightly around her throat. She tried to push him away and to peel his fingers back. Realizing Walt was serious, she reached out, fumbling for the knife. He quickly but gently took hold of his wife's hands, keeping her firmly away from the weapon. His fingers loosened as he stumbled, pressing her body into the doorway.

Walt embraced Vivian and half collapsed onto her. She wanted him to kiss her, and then go back to sleep. Walt also wanted to sleep - and would, right after he helped his wife, one last time.

Gently, Walt pressed his lips into Vivian's pulsing neck, listening to the carolers sing. Their angelic sound filled the streets and rooms. "*Sleep in heavenly peace.*" Walt spun her around to wrap his large hands about her throat again - this time with more force.

She thrashed, kicked at the door, clawed at his hands - and tried to reach for the knife again, but he maneuvered her to the middle of the room. Vivian managed to kick over a porcelain basin, which crashed onto the floor.

It was not new for the couple to battle one another. Walt had enough practice to know how to pin her back to

avoid the punches, kicks and gouges. He always tolerated her nails but had to remain wary of her bite on those nights when he could wait no longer to hold her. He could kiss her only when she exhausted herself, panting beneath him.

The struggle today tired Vivian quickly and gave no opportunity to bite. Her efforts became weaker, but just before her limbs relaxed altogether, she was able to kick, pushing off from the footboard of the bed. This sent Walt reeling backwards - his wife still in his grasp. Vivian's pulse kept time with pounding at the door. The noise had brought people out of their rooms.

Vivian knew she would do something truly horrible to him once this was over - but she didn't know what. They had no more possessions to throw into a creek. No iron rooster to haunt him. No mule to sell. No bow strings to cut. And not much more hair to cut. Then she remembered the locket with her picture that he carried in his pocket. That would do nicely.

Walt had back-stepped all the way to the door from when Vivian kicked at the bed frame. His back slammed against it, startling those on the other side. Walt could

barely stand. He was woozy and the room spun - but he held onto Vivian, knowing they could both be at rest soon.

Once they struck the door, Vivian reached for the knife, but Walt caught her hand as she tried to stab at his legs pressing behind her.

He loosened his grip from her throat to try to secure the weapon, but when he did, she screamed through a cough and let her weight fall to get out of his arms which embraced her. Walt felt her body slide down his own and he grabbed her tighter, trying to keep her on her feet. In doing so the knife slid into her flesh.

Vivian threw her head back, deeply gasping, as her knees buckled. Blood poured over her ribs and their hands. Walt was surprised as much as Vivian at the sight. Her pulse slowed and the throbbing eventually stopped. Her body slumped like a contented sigh. Walt found himself looking at his hands - red with her blood. He sat beside her and felt profoundly wounded, finally painting her.

He traced the line of her jaw slowly with his finger, smearing her with red streaks wherever he touched. Turning her gaze toward him, he saw her peaceful, at last content in his arms. Walt looked into eyes no longer flashing with

hatred and schemes. So quiet and still, he sighed over her incredible beauty. Walt laid her gently on the floor, and noticed her form more as she lay still - more than ever before. He rarely had a chance to study her features unaware - before Vivian would scold him for being idle. Her allure often stunned and saddened him.

Walt drew her closer to caress her cheek with his own. Pressing his lips to face softly, he shut her eyelids. Now free, he smelled her hair, and knew he'd miss her.

Walt moved one arm behind her legs to hoist her up. He carried her to the bed as carolers offered a toast of good health for the coming New Year. *"Good master and good mistress, As you sit beside the fire, Pray think of us poor children, Who wander in the mire."*

For just a moment, it occurred to Walt that he could confess in full to murdering his children and be taken back to Wyoming for a decent hanging. But that would require a lie, and Walt was no liar. He already felt bad for just thinking he could say nothing further than the fact that they died and he buried them. That would be a lie of sorts since a half truth is a half lie. There was no comfortable middle ground to hide inside. Yet Walt remained unsure

whether his children were murdered at all. Now, with Vivian in his arms, he believed her story.

Deciding to stay in Nebraska and fry, comfortably sitting in a chair, Walt knew people would mention his poor wife, murdered so young. He would remember only the pleasant times - though they were few. Then there would be real rest, and Walt breathed easy with that thought. He would soon be with his family. Walt whispered the names of his children, and that of his wife.

It seemed she went fairly quickly, with more surprise than pain. He felt glad for that. The singers in the street hushed and church bells rang the hour. Walt ignored the commotion at the door. Shouts mingled with whispers in the hall, and another storm of footfalls neared - stronger than the last.

Walt tenderly slid a wisp of Vivian's hair in place across her brow and straightened and smoothed her skirt along her legs. There was just enough time to fold his wife's hands across her breast before they took him.

Walt did not struggle and had nothing in particular to say.